

6

KAZUMA KAMACHI
鎌池和馬

illust.

真早

最強をこじらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
アトリリーチェの弱点

その名は
「ぶーぶー」

Illustrations



KAZUMA KAMACHI

鎌池和馬

illust. 真早



そして世界はさいだいのききをむかえます。



本来なら心やさしい、
だけどしんかのかていで間違えてしまった。



【イベリコオーク】という名のきょういを。



最強をこじらせた
ベアトリッチェの弱点
6
レベルカリスト剣聖女



その名は
「ぶーぶー」

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祝福ある時間へようこそ

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今この瞬間よりメッチャクチャにしてやるぞ!!」

妖精達の女王【ストリオーナ】と集いし者達

最強をこじらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
アトリリーチェの弱点6

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KAZUMA KAMACHI

illust. 真早

Prologue: Fragmentary Records of a Certain Legend

Once upon a time in a certain place, there was a small pig.

The pig thought he was ugly and feared joining everyone else. But a human girl held out her hand to that pig.

That girl, who was named Beatrice, parted ways with him, but they were reunited after a long time had passed.

That was the beginning of a great adventure. While separated from the girl, the pig learned how to live on his own. He used his strength to challenge many different obstacles with a tackle.

There were bad humans known as Elkiad who attacked the pig's village.

There was a Succubus named Tselika who recalled her own wickedness in order to take the hair of a human who had died in Ground's Nir and return it to Earth.

He got into fights at times, but he had managed to resolve it all nicely.

The pig's circle of friends gradually grew, but then he ran into a large obstacle. That obstacle's name was the Sage. She had worked with Elkiad to destroy the pig's village. And more importantly, she looked an awful lot like Beatrice.

The Sage nearly defeated the pig and his friends with overwhelming Magic, but they somehow managed to drive her off by working together.

The Sage had worked with the pig's race to fight back against a monster sleeping in the deepest depths of the Labyrinth. But the pig's race was afflicted

by a strange disease and they fell before completing that goal.

With the Sage, the Elder, and the others gone, no one remained to stop the monster.

That monster, Abyss, took the form of a girl. The entire island floating in the ocean existed to complete that girl. So once she was completed, the island would have no purpose and it would cease to function with no thought for the people living there.

Perhaps no one was in the wrong. Nevertheless, the pig and his friends challenged Abyss in order to protect everyone's lives.

Abyss only wanted to see the real world. But if she went outside, that beautiful world would be destroyed. And if she could not see it regardless, the attempt was not worth it. Once the monster realized that, she chose to take her own life to protect everyone else.

Once it was all over, Abyss said that she had been created to fight a great enemy. The Underworld Lord had destroyed all of the humans who had lived on the land of Ground's Nir, as opposed to Beatrice and the other humans from Earth. That was the enemy she had been created to defeat.

With Abyss defeated, no one remained to stop the Underworld Lord.

The Underworld, which resembled a large fish, landed at Ground's Nir. An army of the dead rushed out. The Underworld Lord had consumed all life in that world, but he then attempted to spread his reach through the Gates and to Earth.

The pig, Beatrice, and the others put up a desperate resistance and actually boarded the Underworld itself.

They wanted to defeat the Underworld Lord before everyone on the island was wiped out and the invasion of Earth began, but their haste came back to bite them and those precious girls lost their lives.

The pig felt great sorrow. But the Sage arrived and told him it might be

possible to bring back the lost lives using the power to create the next generation.

The pig decided it was not the time to cry. He wanted to revive Beatrice's Party as well as the Elder and the rest of the villagers.

They successfully defeated the Underworld Lord, but he left them with a final riddle. They could only save one group. To revive one group of precious people, the other would have to be abandoned.

The pig and the Sage began to fight.

It seemed like an endless fight, but the ghosts of Beatrice and her Party found the correct answer. The requirement for a choice was a lie and there was in fact a way to save everyone.

Beatrice managed to end the fighting, but the Underworld Lord used that time to escape to where Beatrice's Party's bodies were stored. He attempted to acquire a new body, but Royal Elf Sibyl stood in his way.

She said, "Come forth, Vivian."

The Underworld Lord had been using a mermaid girl's body, but it began to move of its own accord and Vivian successfully took her fate into her own hands.

Thus, both Beatrice's Party and the villagers were saved, but then a further problem occurred.

The pig's species had acquired great strength in order to fight a great enemy, but their excessive fighting instincts meant they were on the verge of harming people indiscriminately.

They had wanted someone to stop them before they harmed people for no reason.

Yet the Sage had resurrected them in that state.

And the greatest threat now faces the world.

They were originally kindhearted, but they took a wrong turn on the path of evolution.

That threat goes by the name Iberian Orc.

Chapter 1: That Red is Like a Natural Disaster

Part 1

God created the world in six days and he assigned the following day as a day of rest.

A great accomplishment was carried out on each of those work days and humans were created on the final sixth day.

The dry season had arrived.

The uniqueness of the four seasons was no more. As far as the eye could see, the world was filled with a sun so scorching that even the beads of sweat on the girl's soft and fine skin evaporated.

“ ... ”

She wore her hair in twintails by directly tying knots in the long black hair instead of using any kind of hair tie. A red party dress covered skin so white it seemed to reflect the light. A small hardware key shaped like a rapier hung from her neck.

The girl was taking a short rest while leaning back against the metal soundproofing wall of a highway located a level above the ground. While it had originally been a highway, not a single car was driving along the cracked and mirage-covered asphalt. A few cars could be seen abandoned where they had crashed into the central divider, so it was painfully obvious that this place was not necessarily safe.

To reiterate, the blue sky above was clear as could be.

Brilliant direct sunlight and unhelpful sudden downpours. The dry season and the wet season. The weather had settled into those two extremes and neither one was kind to human life.

“Phew...”

The girl drank from a small glass bottle of water she took from a small bag hanging from her shoulder and she wiped the sweat from her brow. She knew reusing plastic bottles invited the risk of damage to the bottle thanks to the battered survival book she had found in a half-destroyed bookstore early on. E-books were convenient, but that genre had to be in printed form. She removed herself from the stainless steel wall and began walking again. After walking for a while longer, the silver soundproofing wall ended. From here on, there was no more than a waist-high concrete wall. The dress girl crouched low and cautiously remained below the wall that was as hot as a frying pan.

The twintail girl stopped partway along and pulled a smartphone out from her chest.

It was powered off. In fact, it did not have enough power to power on.

She used the smooth glass screen as a mirror to look above the wall while focused on the location of shadows. She could see the scenery beyond the highway.

She saw a cracked and dried sea of mud.

The same colors as an old Japanese home's earthen walls filled that scene up to a height of about 3 meters from the ground. The road and sidewalk were indistinguishable and only the car roofs could be seen sticking up. In addition to normal cars, she also saw special vehicles that were probably from the JSDF and had gun turrets or rocket launchers installed. Great masses of mud had gotten into the stairs leading down to subway stations and the intense sun had hardened it. There was no sign of life. No dogs, no cats, no crows, no pigeons, and no people.

Only the colors of mud cracked like a cookie.

As soon as she saw it all again, a raw and oppressive smell reached the girl's

nose.

There were several high-rise buildings made of glass and concrete, but few of them were still standing straight. They were tilted and some were broken partway up. The mud had transformed everything. Not even the solid buildings could survive. Just like a ship's wave-making resistance, the larger the building, the greater the force of the mud on them. And the force of sticky mud was far greater than smooth seawater. With the foundation itself loosening, it was in fact the larger buildings that crumbled.

The red dress girl tilted her smartphone to look further into the distance.

Even the giant broadcast tower made from countless steel beams had tilted and broken partway up.

This was Tokyo, the capital of Japan.

No, anywhere in the world would be like this now.

“ ... ”

But this was not enough to change the red dress girl's expression at this point. In fact, she was being pursued by a more pressing threat to her life.

It was directly below.

There was just one thing in that scene that brought death to all. Below the highway, a large form trudged across the mud that had been briefly dried by the arrival of the dry season. The 4 or 5 meter giant with sinister fangs on its porcine face wore only a loincloth over its characteristic bright red flesh.

It was an Iberian Orc.

The alternate world of Ground's Nir was a small island that could be walked around in three days. The countless Gates that connected back to the entire Earth were concentrated in that small area. Once they had made their way to Earth after going berserk, their threat had scattered across the entire planet with no concern for the existing national borders or defensive lines. They had rushed out from the center of the important points of every country and region: the cathedrals, the military bases, the secret societies, and the Detached Magic Palace.

There was nothing humanity could have done.

With the leadership suddenly removed, it had not taken long for all the scattered modern military forces to be individually annihilated. It had taken a mere 24 hours. The muddy world created by the two extremes of the dry season and rainy season were a result of the Iberian Orcs indiscriminately devouring plants and animals to meet their great energy requirements. Even the tree roots that had held the fertile soil together had been taken away.

They were in the process of consuming the entire planet.

This showed just how much they had restrained themselves to coexist with the other Nonhumans on that island that could be walked around in just three days.

(...An Iberian Orc...)

That girl had always walked by Boo Boo's side, but the look in her eyes sharpened. When she focused on it, she breathed a long but quiet breath and had to work to keep her cool and calm her heart which was pounding against her wishes.

Sweat poured from her body for reasons other than the scorching sun.

Red.

The color of the skin was different from Boo Boo's. These mistaken ones had continually evolved themselves to fight a powerful enemy, but they had failed to restrain their appetite for destruction. Words would no longer reach these Red Iberian Orcs.

She heard the intermittent sound of sniffing. The highway stood a few meters from the ground, but that was not enough to stop that mass of muscles. The twintail girl had only chosen this route because she wanted to avoid leaving her footprints or scent on the ground. The Red Iberian Orcs' senses were even more extraordinary than Boo Boo's. If one began tracking her, it could easily spell doom for both her and the shelter she would return to.

The Red held a large hunk of metal in his right hand. It may have originally been the bumper of a dump truck. If he swung that around with his great strength, it could tear a large chunk out of the girl just by grazing her.

Trying to drive him away in a direct fight would be the height of folly.

Humanity's one advantage was that the Red Iberian Orcs had come from Ground's Nir, so they were not used to Earth's atmospheric composition and planetary rotation and revolution. Just like the girl could only spend a few days in that other world, they could only remain active on Earth for so long.

So the only effective method was to wait it out and let time do the work.

No one could use Magic on Earth, so the difference in strength was absolute. Simply noticing the nearly-4m giant's approach was all the luck she could hope for. She had to throw out her puny pride and focus only on escaping, hiding, and surviving.

The girl waited.

The girl waited.

The girl waited.

A small sound echoed through the silent space.

Then there was an explosion.

The dry mud below the highway audibly burst. The Red Iberian Orc jumped more than 15 meters into the air, which brought him higher than a school building. The red dress girl stayed curled up by the wall with her hands over her mouth to suppress her scream.

He landed on a nearby abandoned building.

A crack must have run through a plastic sign due to the extreme temperature differences. The girl had already seen plenty of solar panels break before her eyes despite how crucial they were as a power source that did not require fuel.

The Red Iberian Orc tore the sign off the wall, tilted his thick head, and then stepped inside through a broken window. Only after seeing that did the twintail girl take a long, long breath.

(I see so many of them here. Probably because Japan is a Gate superpower just like America and China.)

The Reds had arrived from Ground's Nir, but their distribution was not even.

Differences in technological level and economic status meant different parts of the planet had different numbers of Gates. As expected, Japan had a lot of Gates for such a small country, so it would have been exposed to the greatest threat on the doomed planet.

“ ... ”

The red dress girl held her breath and listened for any sounds in the silence.

The Red had left and there was no sign of him suddenly returning.

Just because he would react to sounds and smells did not mean she was dumb enough to throw a pebble or fire an arrow in the opposite direction. The Red Iberian Orcs were known for their clever minds as much as their great physical strength. They would learn a move they had seen once and quickly see through it. Reacting on reflex would only reduce what few cards they did have available.

(Since he's moved up, the highway will actually be more dangerous.)

If the Red Iberian Orc glanced out an elevated window on a whim and spotted the red dress girl, she could not escape. Without any chance to run away or even beg for her life, that large dump truck bumper would swiftly transform her into a hunk of meat. But this was a highway and she would not just find a convenient emergency staircase or exit ramp. The red dress girl pulled a bundle of black and yellow construction rope from the small bag hanging from her shoulder. She pictured a sailor's knot in her head and tied the rope around the metal pole of a streetlight.

She dropped the rope over the edge.

Climbing a rope was difficult, but no special technique was needed to descend one.

“There we go...ow.”

She meant to make a slow descent of the 10m drop, but she still felt a burning sensation in her slender fingertips. Perhaps she should have gone with proper gloves instead of these lace ones. She could not visit a doctor, so even a slight wound was a risk. She was worried about the smell, but she pulled a small bottle from the bag and sprinkled alcohol disinfectant on her hands.

The Red Iberian Orc had moved to a position higher than the highway.

That meant the highway would hide her from view if she moved below it. She could not underestimate his senses of hearing and smell, but she could at least avoid complete suicide.

And there was something she wanted to investigate on the surface during the dry season.

If the rainy season returned for some reason, the hardened “mud” would begin moving again. That was not something human legs could traverse and, even if she did manage to force her way across, she would be leaving a blatant trail behind. It would be like asking the Red Iberian Orcs to follow her.

“Now, then...”

A single footprint or hair could be fatal right now.

She was as cautious as could be as she looked around. She needed a long stick, whether that was a tree branch or whatever else. She could not carry something that bulky around in her small bag. Then she spotted a work van’s roof almost entirely buried in the dried mud. She removed the stainless steel stepladder that was still attached to its holder and she held it in both hands like a spear.

Of course, this was not to battle the Red Iberian Orc.

There was a stench that even a human like her could sense. The area in the highway’s shadow was still wet in places, so she paid careful attention to where she stepped and slowly shifted her body weight one step at a time.

She made her way to a pile about as tall as she was.

It was clearly a different substance than the dried mud.

That was only natural because it was Red Iberian Orc dung.

She did not have the guts to investigate this during the wet rainy season.

“...The smell has changed again.”

It was well-known among animal researchers that the smell was very different between herbivores and carnivores. The red dress girl stuck out the silver

stepladder and poked at the dung pile to push it open. The smell grew stronger, but she had to bear with it. She regretted not using a stocking or some gauze to create a makeshift mask. There were some undigested materials left inside: some kind of animal fur, chewed-up bones, and something like a horn. The girl frowned at what she saw. She was lucky that she knew how to tell the bones and horns apart.

(So they've started eating deer. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before they reach humans...)

That was when she heard a dull explosion of noise overhead.

"Kh."

The girl ducked down without thinking.

After jumping into that abandoned building, the Red Iberian Orc had apparently jumped back out another window. He landed on top of the highway above. If she had stayed up there, it would have been over for her. For emergencies, the small bag hanging from her shoulder had a metal measuring tape which could be used as a whip and some compressed gas cylinders for portable burners, but she wanted to avoid fighting them at all cost. The twintail girl focused on her pounding heart while she held her breath. She heard another loud leap, so he had apparently gone to another abandoned building.

She thought about the "material" before her eyes once more.

...Those Red Iberian Orcs could mate with any plant or animal to create descendants that incorporated the strong points of those plants and animals.

So after coming to Earth, they had started a selection process.

Through their predatory behavior, they selected the lifeforms to be incorporated into their genes. They had started by consuming the stationary plants, moved up to the simple and primitive insects arthropods, eventually reached the lizards and amphibians...and had finally reached the mammals with much more complexly developed brains.

They were measuring how much of a resistance those lifeforms made.

The powerless were devoured and converted into energy, while the powerful

were mercilessly mated with to have their traits incorporated into the Iberian Orc line.

It was a selective consumption.

There were still no reports of the Red Iberian Orcs successfully mating with an Earth lifeform. But if they did succeed, the next generation would be freed from the bonds of the atmosphere and planetary movement, so they would be able to remain active on Earth indefinitely. The current generation was restricted to a few days – a week at the most. If the humans lost that one advantage of time being on their side, there would be no stopping the Red Iberian Orcs. The entire planet would be overrun by the next generation.

They had already reached deer.

How many steps were left before they chose humans as their target?

Hippos, rhinos, bears, tigers, lions...the dress girl was reminded of the TV program she had seen debating which animal was the strongest. Humans were classified as the peak of the primates, but that was only by human standards. It was possible that the trial would reach the humans before some of those ferocious beasts.

What would happen if they stayed silent until that time came? If they were deemed worthy, the Red Iberian Orcs would force themselves on the humans. If they were not deemed worthy, they Red Iberian Orcs would devour them.

Needless to say, neither option was acceptable.

With that clear limit in mind, they had to work out a counterattack plan to ensure the survival of the human race.

Part 2

In a total transformation from before, rain poured down. The other of the extremes – the rainy season’s downpours – had arrived. The motionless mud regained its stickiness and everything on the surface was slowly swept away. The only people who could walk around in that without being swallowed up were the Red Iberian Orcs with their immense strength and weight.

“Nhheee...”

Haruka, youngest of the three maid sisters, made a weird noise in front of a cracked mirror.

She could not use the sweet-smelling toothpaste, but having a toothbrush still meant a lot.

The red dress girl called out to her as she approached.

“Haruka, are you okay? You haven’t given up, have you?”

“Oh, milady! W-welcome back!!” The small animal of a maid looked back and her face lit up. “It started raining without warning again, but were you okay?”

“Yes, I just barely made it, but I could mostly tell from reading the clouds.”

The maids waiting here would have been trying to predict the sudden downpours using a makeshift hygrometer made from around 10 long hairs stretched taut. The heliport would have proper meteorological equipment, but that was no use without a stable power source.

They were in the largest building of Tokyo Middletown, a famous complex in Roppongi, the same district as the Detached Magic Palace. The mud had done a lot of damage here too, but the surrounding art museum and residential buildings had collapsed and acted as a breakwater, preventing this building from collapsing.

It was far from safe against a Red Iberian Orc going all out, but they were

staying on the top floor. The program-controlled elevators were not needed to move between the surface and the top floor. With a small gondola, a weight, a pulley, and some wire, they could use analog tech to mimic the elevator.

Around 50 men and women of all ages were sitting lethargically around the area.

Including people commuting from other prefectures, it was said Tokyo used to have 1.3 million people coming and going every day. They had no way of judging how many shelters there were in that scene of mud and abandoned buildings, but the red dress girl hoped there were as many as possible.

Surprisingly, while there was weariness and sorrow in the shelter, there was little resentment or anger. Their normal life had been taken from them by a clear enemy – the Iberian Orcs – but being inhuman must have paid off. This was being handled more like a natural disaster than a war. It may have been like a swarm of locusts.

Then more voices spoke up from the side.

“Oh, Beatrice. You’re back?”

“H-hwehh... The Bills’ Todoroki Tower was a complete disaster...”

The voices belonged to an athletic woman in glasses and a tight skirt suit and to a busty shrine maiden with swirly glasses and soft and fluffy blonde hair. They were the two the red dress girl had worked with in Ground’s Nir. The glasses cow was about to collapse because of the large backpack on her back and the various drum bags hanging from her shoulders. With all the straps wrapped around her, her large breasts were even more of a sight to behold than usual. Comparing her to the flaaat woman next to her made it clear that glasses girls came in many different forms.

The red dress girl and the others were staying in Tokyo Midtown, a giant complex containing a triple digit number of stores, but too much food risked inviting in the Red Iberian Orcs. Thus, they had thrown it all outside and used it as bait.

It may have been similar to the idea of never keeping food in your tent when camping in the jungle where ferocious animals prowled.

“Anyway, Filinion, I see you’re as unathletic as ever.”

“Pant, pant. Th-then can’t you let me use *that*...?”

“Don’t be stupid. The solar panels keep breaking and the generators are too loud to use, so our power is limited. More importantly, Beatrice, how did your fieldwork go?”

The red dress girl placed her hands on her hips and spoke in a different mood than with the maid named Haruka.

“I’ll explain in more detail after we gather everyone together, but things are only getting worse. By the way, how did the food hunt go?”

“Roppongi Bills was a good supply since it’s only 300m from here, but the place reeks now. Passing the four day mark must have been bad because everything out in the open is rotting. Even chlorine-sterilized tap water only lasts a few days if you leave it out and any food filled with various nutrients will go bad even faster. Refrigerators really were an incredible invention. And with the power out, the back and forth between dry and rainy has meant high temperatures and lots of moisture. We aren’t going to find any non-canned supplies from here on out.”

“The Reds are still as lively as ever, so we need to plan for another 3 or 4 days...for a total of a week. Oh, right. What about the packaged foods?”

“Have you heard how greater wax moth caterpillars can eat plastic bags? It was like peering into hell.”

Had the poor conditions caused an outbreak of them, or had they escaped from an insecticide maker or a health research lab? Given the rich residents of the Bills, the red dress girl guessed they may have been food for reptile pets or the possessions of an insect lover. Tokyo was filled with a surprising variety of animals.

Incidentally, the water in the tank on the Bills roof had similarly gone bad. Tap water remained clean by the constant movement of people opening the tap to use it. If it stayed in one place for too long, the rust and bacteria would get inside it. Now that they had passed the four day mark, even normal drinking water needed to be purified with a filter made with pebbles and sand, with

boiling, or with chlorine.

The red dress girl did not normally eat such things, so she looked a bit lost as she asked her next question.

“Even *the things like* cup noodles and freeze-dried soups?”

“I can tell you didn’t see them. Those preserved foods were already an issue because of the smell that had gotten on them, remember? And in addition to the caterpillars, the plastic containers are not perfectly airtight. ...I really don’t want to explain any further, but the mold and bacteria from the rotting fruit had made its way to other sections. Seeing that blackened disaster would kill anyone’s appetite.”

That cow was an incarnation of sloth, so if even she was this dejected, they apparently really were in a pinch. They were relying on stores’ inventory during a power outage, so they had predicted this would happen eventually. But if she was being honest, the red dress girl felt this was too soon.

Haruka the Maid grew pale as she listened in.

“U-um. You three can use the Gates to escape to the other world, right? Then couldn’t you go get food there and not worry about us...?”

They could indeed do that.

They could only stay in Ground’s Nir for a few days, but they would not be exposed to the threat of the Red Iberian Orcs during that time and they would be ensured safe food and shelter. Simply put, they only had to reverse the normal way of things. They generally could not bring anything between the two worlds, but if the human who ate the food could travel between them, then *the people who could do that* could eat without issue. They could relax while in the other world, return to this dangerous planet when their internal clocks needed readjusting, and then immediately *return to the other world*. From a risk reduction standpoint, that was the better choice.

But normal people like the three maid sisters could not use that method. They would remain exposed to the threat of the Red Iberian Orcs 24/7.

The girl with black twintails placed her hand on Haruka’s small head.

“Hyah! M-milady?”

“Don’t worry. We won’t abandon you.”

“Um, but...”

The small animal of a maid grew flustered and the glasses duo sighed.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. And staying here is the logical choice. After all, if the Reds take over the entire planet, they will always be wandering around right in front of the Gates. That means we couldn’t use them. We can only stay in the other world for a few days, so we’re goners as soon as we can’t return. We need to join forces and solve this problem before that happens. That’s the best choice.”

“If we draw a line between the haves and have-nots, it could cause infighting on the human side. That stratified stress is the greatest obstacle to overcoming a large problem. ...Okay, little kids, Off-Season Santa is about to hand out some treats.”

With that, the swirly glasses shrine maiden with soft and fluffy blonde hair walked over to some small children with a bag stuffed full of something. The self-interested children gathered around the cow with complaints like “treats are for Halloween”, “where are the toys”, and “let’s play a trick on her with some toys”. The red dress girl gently narrowed her eyes as she watched the scene from a short distance away.

“...Armelina, it may be time.”

“Seriously? I would really prefer to get rid of this unease.”

“Everything in Roppongi Hills has rotted and you know how frightening their senses are. At only 300 meters, the wind could carry the smell here. This place will be destroyed if it attracts the Reds’ attention.”

Thinking back to the great leaps near the highway, it was clear that the Red Iberian Orcs could get in anywhere if they wanted to. The girl and the others were staying at the top floor of Middletown Tower because they had wanted the smells and sounds of daily life to be as far off the ground as possible. That effort would be wasted if that rotting smell was blown over to Tokyo Middletown. The stench might make humans want to vomit, but it would only

inspire hunger in those Red Iberian Orcs and their much stronger digestive systems.

The beautiful police officer looked annoyed.

“Could we maybe purify the Bills’ Todoroki Tower?”

“How exactly? Using fire would stand out too much. I don’t know how much spoiled inventory they have, but disposing of it inconspicuously isn’t realistic, is it?”

The glasses beauty in a tight suit clicked her tongue and looked over at the children again. She watched their delight at being given bags of relatively odorless cookies and biscuits.

“...Gaining control of this building was a miracle in and of itself. We had to throw out all the food in Middletown Tower to distract the Reds... Doing all that again and while making a mass migration without any decoys simply isn’t realistic.”

“I know that.”

The red dress girl stopped speaking there.

At the children’s insistence, she used the edge of a round can lid to cut open a hard-to-open bag. Once the children had moved far enough away, the glasses beauty in a tight skirt suit opened her mouth again.

“Besides, we still haven’t found another candidate, have we? Even without the Reds, we have no future if we start moving during the dry season and simply wander around at random. We’d just get caught in a sudden downpour and swallowed up by the mud.”

“That’s why I’m not arguing for that. I will not abandon Haruka and the others.”

The red dress girl slowly exhaled.

And she spoke with conviction.

“I said my field work showed things are only getting worse, right? The Reds have started eating deer. With their selective consumption, they either eat you or mate with you. It isn’t long now until that trial arrives for us humans. Either

way, we've reached the limit."

"Wait, you aren't suggesting what I think you are, are you?"

"So we have to stop hiding. ...From here on out, we need an actual counterattack plan. Are you willing to hear me out?"

Part 3

The fact that they were all young women came in handy.

They only had to say they were taking a bath to gain some privacy without anyone questioning it. They wanted to avoid an explosive spread of confusion in this enclosed space. Of course, the emergency situation meant they only had a makeshift partition made from a blue tarp and a clothesline pole to hide them.

Misoka, second of the three maid sisters, checked on the pot of hot water. An alcohol lamp could be made by filling a small *tsukudani* bottle with rubbing alcohol and sticking a rag inside in place of a wick. Placing the lid on top would hold the rag in place with the edge. It could be lit with a simple electric lighter made from aluminum foil and a makeshift battery made from an electrode and fruit juice in a bottle. The friction of a drilling motion was the stereotypical example of starting a fire without fuel, but unlike in manga, not that many people could start a fire with just a stick. Using a magnifying glass or cup of water near the window was also an option, but that could reflect the sunlight and draw unwanted attention.

They of course did not use the hot water as is. They diluted it in a bucket of unheated water to complete their preparations.

“Okay, that should be good for the water. Lady, you can adjust the temperature to your liking. The heat can send the alcohol shooting out, so put it in the bucket.”

“Thanks.”

They called this a bath, but they could not fill a tub with pure tap water. They could only draw some water with a stocking, dissolve a bit of odorless mouthwash and rubbing alcohol into it, and wipe down their bodies with a wet cloth. Tokyo Middletown, where they were staying, and Roppongi Bills, where they had gotten food, were stocked with soap and shampoo, but all those

commercial products had strong artificial floral scents that the Red Iberian Orcs would never overlook.

(I wish we had the shampoos and soaps that zookeepers use, but with the cars and trains down, it would be hard to cross the wasteland all the way to Tama or Ueno.)

The red dress girl took a small cloth from Misoka.

“Nothing could be more obvious, but let me restate the basic premise here: There is no way at all that we can stand up to the Reds. Not with any method here on Earth. Do we all agree on that point?”

“Reluctantly.”

Perhaps because she had prided herself in protecting her nation, the glasses police officer in a tight skirt suit childishly pouted her lips. Sounds reminiscent of thick rubber snapping came from her, but they were likely her removing the equipment underneath her tight suit.

Despite the unprecedented chaos of every nations’ leaders and chain of command being attacked at once, the red dress girl’s conclusion was obvious enough from seeing the fighters crashed into high-rise buildings and armored vehicles being swept away by the flowing mud of the rainy season. Modern military might could not defeat them. And that was not simply an issue of physical strength. Their brains rivaled supercomputers, so their mental calculations had worked out all kinds of codes, from the locks on shelters to the launch codes for ballistic missiles. There had been weapons and bases with great destructive power and sturdy defensive power, but a lot of the trump cards had ended up unused when the Reds reset the targeting locks and a lot of the shelters had been rendered useless when the thick metal doors were opened.

The Gates connecting Earth to the other world supposedly required the support of a Shining Weapon to use, but the Red Iberian Orcs had entirely ignored that as they flooded through the Gates around the world. They could carry out the data processing of a precision weapon all on their own.

That left only one hope for the red dress girl and the others.

“...We bring Magic to Earth.”

The trick to effectively using a single cloth was to start by wiping off your face and then moving to the relatively clean areas. If you started with the bottom of your feet or your privates right away, the rest would be a tragedy.

“If we can’t rely on modern military might, we need to rely on some other power. That’s the only way to solve this problem.”

“You make it sound so simple, but how exactly do you propose we do that? At the very least, that isn’t a trick we know how to do.”

The shrine maiden with soft and fluffy blonde hair undid her collar and used a wet cloth to wipe behind her ears and around her neck while she asked that question.

In Ground’s Nir, they were the Level Cappers who had reached Level 99 and mastered Magic, but that was not something they could use here on Earth.

“There is an exception.”

The red dress girl moved from her shoulders to her hands and then from her bare thighs to her ankles while she let the second of the three maid sisters scrub her back. Even with such a makeshift setup, the warmth of the water was enough for her skin to grow somewhat flushed.

“Demon Lord Tselika used her contract with Gruagach to use Magic here, remember? We have to look to that for hope. We might have been able to rely on Ultimate Weapon Abyss if she hadn’t been destroyed, but I doubt we can expect much from her.”

Technically, Tselika had not crossed between worlds and had only pressed against the barrier between them like a magnet to move the metal clips on the other side (i.e. Earth), but the end result was little different.

The soft and fluffy blonde sent her hand from below her large breasts to her navel as she responded.

“Um, Gruagach is helping provide food in the other world right now, so do we need to call her here?”

There were countless Gates in Tokyo alone.

But an individual could only use one at which they had registered their Shining Weapon.

For example, the red dress girl used the one in the garden of the Detached Magic Palace in Roppongi, the soft and fluffy blonde shrine maiden used the Dragon Palace Chamber of Ushigashira Shrine in Akasaka, and the tight suit glasses woman used a mobile work truck. Unfortunately, most of those were buried below dried mud. Gruagach's Gate was presumably at a high-class girl's school in Shinjuku. The mud would not be a problem as long as it was above the second floor, but...

"With the Reds everywhere, we can't walk all the way to Shinjuku. Even a few kilometers would be a hellish distance right now, and they have even more of an advantage at night thanks to their sharp senses."

"But the Reds are interfering with the Gates using their supercomputer brains, right?"

"...I had Iroka prepare a hacking tool. We just have to rewrite the internal settings and make sure the closest Gate can summon Gruagach."

At first glance, they seemed to be taking a shortcut that ignored several hurdles.

But that did not mean every barrier had been removed.

The tight suit woman frowned while tracing her finger along the side of her glasses.

"Hey, the closest Gate is in Roppongi Hills's Todoroki Tower. It's on the 52nd floor's reservation-required observation deck. Which is not good. The food's spoilage rate wasn't part of our initial plan. Isn't the rotting smell going to call in the Reds before long?"

"That's right."

The red dress girl quietly nodded.

And she continued.

"That's why we have to break through."

"..."

“ ... ”

Even the Level Cappers had to fall silent here.

This meant a head-on battle with those incarnations of violence.

Instead of hiding and waiting it out, they would be pitting strength against strength and pushing back. They had suggested the idea several times before, but they had always shaken their heads. The odds of survival were very nearly zero.

“Todoroki Tower is the tallest building of Roppongi Hills. Let’s plan out how to reach its observation deck, rewrite the Gate’s settings, and summon Gruagach. We’ll probably have to wait in front of the Gate for 2 to 3 minutes. ...No one is managing the original girl’s school Gate anymore, so the Reds might be walking around in front of it. No matter what, we need to avoid having our one hope killed instantly in a run-in with the Reds after returning to Earth. So we need to start this counterattack by retaking the Hills Gate. There are tanks almost entirely buried in mud and there are fighters crashed into buildings. We should be able to use their gun turrets and bombs as weapons. We can put up a fight.”

“...That is a hell of a thing to say. We’re starting with the assumption that we can’t beat the Reds without Magic, but now you’re telling us to get by without Magic? We don’t know how many Reds there are, but we have to assume more and more are going to arrive if we cause a lot of noisy explosions as we fight.”

“That’s why we can’t think about winning. If we focus solely on using that firepower on temporarily drawing the Reds away from the Gate, things might change.”

“After all this, you end it on a ‘*might*’? Ugh...”

The swirly glasses shrine maiden sighed as if resigning herself to what was coming.

They could not use Magic. They were no more than human on Earth. But they were still Level Cappers. If they were choosing a suicide squad for their plan, they had no choice but to raise their own hands. They could not escape that responsibility.

They made the decision so readily that Misoka the Maid grew flustered.

“W-wait, lady! Don’t look so sad. If you’re going, I’m going with you. In fact, you three are the foundation of our strategy here and we don’t need to send our generals out on the front line!!”

“Thanks, Misoka, but this is our job.”

The girl smiled with her dress’s shoulder straps pulled down to reveal her back.

This was a dangerous mission that used elements from both Earth and the other world. Everything would come together more smoothly if they used people familiar with the situation on Earth and Ground’s Nir. Also, keeping the other people away from this conversation was for more than just preventing the spread of fear. They had also wanted to avoid a rush of volunteers moved by momentary emotion.

The current Red problem was a lingering effect of the Underworld incident.

But at the same time, that resurrection process had saved the girls’ lives as well. Since they had benefited from it, they could not look away now.

The tight skirt woman spoke while massaging her legs to get rid of any swelling more than just wiping off the sweat.

“In practical terms, how strong is Tselika? I mean, I remember her spreading terror through Tokyo before, but can she alone defeat all those Reds? In fact, I’m not sure we could beat all of them even if we amassed all of humanity’s forces in Ground’s Nir where we could use Magic...”

They only had to think of Boo Boo.

These greatest and strongest lifeforms had even more strength and intelligence than him and they were trapped by a desire for destruction. Plus, this was a large group of them. Anyone with any sense at all would want to avoid a direct fight, even with the use of Magic.

However...

“Gruagach might come in handy there as well. Her Job is Summon Hunter, right?”

“Doesn’t that let her make a contract with Ground’s Nir’s Nonhumans and

then store their power in an arrow? ...Huh?"

"The Reds are Iberian Orcs from the other world, so they're categorized as Nonhumans. If a contract could be made and they were brought onto our side, the strongest enemy might become the strongest ally."

"You can't even speak with the Reds, so would that really work?"

With her back finished, the twintailed girl took the rag back from Misoka, wiped off her armpits, bent her legs, and reached behind her knees.

"There's no way to know, so it will be a gamble, but Tselika's Skill is Charm, right? That allowed Gruagach to effectively ignore the Nonhuman's will and half-forcibly make a contract with them. If Tselika and the Summon Hunter are working together, they might be able to force more and more of the Reds into contracts. If that works, it will snowball into a victory for us."

"So they'll gain enough power to defeat the Reds? Allowing an individual to gain enough power to crush the whole group is a scary thought. It rejects the entire idea of modern war..."

"Also, that method does not require killing the Reds. Assuming they can be bound by the contract and Gruagach can manage their power."

Once things had calmed down, they could take their time and think up a way to heal the *Red disease*. The girls did not want to be killed by the Iberian Orcs, but they did not want to kill them either. Boo Boo had done more than enough to teach them how kind the Iberian Orcs really were.

Fear was fine and anger would work.

But they could not let hate motivate them.

"The Reds are clearly in an abnormal state, so the biggest hurdle is whether or not Tselika's Charm will work on them. Since we don't have any way of testing it, we'll just have to go for it."

"When is Gruagach scheduled to arrive?"

"At 10 tonight. Everything is riding on that."

To put it another way, they could not wait any longer.

The Reds would be drawn in by the rotting stench before the dawn arrived.

Part 4

They could not use noisy generators and they could not use the solar panels that had broken from the temperature changes. Without a stable power source, simply knowing the time was a challenge. Especially at night when primitive sundials did not work. The wall clocks had run on batteries, but those had all been removed for other uses. The simple batteries made from bottled fruit juice all had different voltages and amperages, so they could not be used for electronics.

To reiterate, they could start a fire with a fruit juice battery and aluminum foil and they could make simple lamps with liquor bottles, but they extinguished all flames after sunset. No one had set that rule; they had all naturally done it in fear of the Red Iberian Orcs' sharp senses.

So...

(In an age of smartphones, I had thought only old men would ever want to use a self-winding wristwatch.)

Using the faint moonlight entering through a broken window, the tight suit woman checked the watch's hands and smiled bitterly. Using one with glow-in-the-dark numbers and hands would of course mean a quick death.

Sleeping bags were lined up nearby with disturbing uniformity. It was reminiscent of body bags, but the uncomplaining dead would not work hard to keep the moisture out. Wooden *duckboards* were placed underneath to keep the sleeping bags off the damp concrete, so they clearly contained living humans.

The glasses woman's lips formed a smile as she glanced over at the defenselessly sleeping people, but then she whispered into the darkness as if switching modes.

“(It's time, Beatrice, Filinion. It's the dry season now, so we can walk around

outside. Let's use this chance to reach the Bills right over there. We need to prepare for Gruagach's arrival.)"

The rustling sounds of a few people stirring could be heard from the darkness.

They could not use a single lighter to add to the moonlight, so they had to be careful to not step on any of the simple beds made from sleeping bags and duckboards.

Once the three had gathered, they exchanged a nod.

It was time to begin the counterattack. The battle against the Red Iberian Orcs was beginning.

Yet they did not make a hopeless last stand with their full forces. They could not bring any brave volunteers to their almost certain doom and the Reds were Iberian Orcs just like Boo Boo. They had made a mess of this planet, but these three did not want to fight back as if throwing hatred at them.

"(Tanks, armored vehicles, attack helicopters, and fighters... You've memorized the locations of the stranded and crashed ones with usable guns or bombs, right? Those are our lifelines.)"

"(Yes, but who knows how far their position shifted during the previous rainy season. Well, we just have to go for it until Gruagach has safely arrived.)"

"(Ahhh, this is really more of a job for you combat types...)"

The tight skirt suit glasses woman grabbed two synthetic fiber bags from the ground and gave one to the red dress girl and one to the soft and fluffy blonde shrine maiden.

"(Changing in the dark might be difficult, but it's time for this equipment. Everyone sacrificed convenience to give us the batteries for these, so don't waste them.)"

"(I get that, but how do you put this thing on?)"

The girl frowned, so the glasses woman reached for her own tight skirt suit. She unbuttoned her blouse and unzipped the skirt in the moonlight to reveal... something other than underwear.

Something like thick tape was wrapped around her, following the contours of

her muscles. It was a movement assistance suit that used motors and artificial muscles to amplify the wearer's physical strength.

She raised her hands horizontally and slowly spun around.

“(Look at this and figure it out. I’m not an instructor.)”

“(Uehhh, how am I supposed to figure it out just by looking...?)”

The swirly glasses shrine maiden blushed a bit as she reached for the collar of her shrine maiden outfit. Even if it was dark and the others were asleep, she still had to strip down to her underwear with so many people around.

The red dress girl followed the example as she wrapped the special fiber tape around her soft skin, then she attached the joints which looked like electrode clips with batteries attached. With each solid snapping sound, she felt a constricting pressure, like she was wearing a straightjacket or a rubber suit. ... Why she knew what that felt like was a mystery.

“(Nn. Is this really a military product meant to be worn for extended periods of time?)”

“(It’s technically a prototype. Assuming the designer isn’t a pervert, I assume it will be improved from here.)”

Armeline specialized in physical attacks in Ground’s Nir as well. Taking that tactical knowhow – that is, how to swing around blunt weapons – back to the real world and reproducing it with modern technology had been simple enough. This suit had helped there.

“(I was overpowered using this against Tselika. I highly doubt it’s enough to force our way through the Reds, but it’s better than nothing.)”

“(H-hyehh! W-w-wait! Is this joint really in the right place?)”

“(Yes, but your cow body makes anything look like a lewd swimsuit.)”

“(Yes, but your cow body makes anything look like a lewd swimsuit.)”

The other two helped fix the positioning of the tape and they managed finish their preparations. Once the movement assistance suits were equipped, they could wear anything over it, so they put their party dress and shrine maiden outfit back on.

“(Sync with my usage data and you can inherit my control method. It would take too long to set it up from scratch.)”

The tight skirt suit glasses woman had worn her movement assistance suit on a daily basis as something like setting the hands of a clock.

Now that their preparations were complete, it was finally time to head out.

Before grabbing their things, they made sure to check the hygrometer the three maid sisters had made from hair. The red dress girl wore a small bag over her shoulders, the soft and fluffy blonde shrine maiden carried a greedily-large duffel bag, and the tight skirt suit glasses woman carried a practical mountain-climbing rucksack. Those contained their respective weapons and survival goods. Those things would normally feel about the same as something from a child’s secret base, but the equipment was truly their lifeline right now.

While making sure not step on anything in the darkness, they quietly walked between the simple beds made from sleeping bags and duckboards. They did not want to wake the sleeping people. Because they cared for these people, they did not want to get them involved. That was always an option in risky battles.

When they arrived at a primitive analog elevator that used pulleys and weights instead of electricity, they found Iroka, the oldest of the maid sisters, who wore glasses and had a mole below her eye.

“Miss, and you two as well. These tablets contain the hacking tool you requested. There is one for each of you. They are set up so you only need to attach them to the Gate device and the program will run on its own. Even if the Gate has no power, the large-capacity battery will provide temporary power through the cable.”

“Thanks, Iroka.”

The maid looked like she wanted to say something, but she chose to hold her tongue.

Not only was she a data processing specialist, but her personality made her perfect for sharing this “secret” with. Haruka or Misoka would have tried to stop them and caused a commotion. In fact, it was possible those two would

refuse the job in order to keep them from leaving.

Iroka would not do that. Even if she thought her job would place her precious master in danger, she would still carry out the task given to her.

The oldest of the three maid sisters slowly bowed her head.

It took all her strength to keep a tremor from reaching her lips as she spoke in a flawless voice.

“Until you return.”

“Yes.”

Once the obedient maid had seen them off, the three boarded the elevator made from a modified window washing scaffold and descended toward the hellish surface.

During that short wait time, the swirly glasses girl lightly elbowed the tight skirt woman in the side.

“(If it comes to it, we need to make sure at least Beatrice gets away, don’t we?)”

“(Do you really have to ask? She’s the youngest.)”

“I can hear you. And you don’t have to worry over me.”

The height of the ground changed depending on how much mud had flowed in, but the scaffold arrived on the ground floor. Normally, the first through third floors were an atrium, but this was the “ground” now. The red dress girl jogged through the darkness and left through a broken window.

Welcome to a world of death.

They were less than 300 meters from the Roppongi Hills landmark, but they had no idea when a giant red body would appear. If they were spotted on the surface, escaping would be a challenge. The three girls felt the primitive fear of the dark night burning at their nerves as they carefully walked along the dried mud of the dry season, passed by Roppongi Station, looked up at the empty Azabu Police Station, and continued on to the Hills.

They did not encounter any other humans on the way, which was entirely

expected at this point.

“No one in the subway station and no one in the police station. Where has everyone evacuated to?” muttered the tight skirt woman who had likely borrowed various equipment from that police station.

The people could always have been swallowed up by the mud or attacked by the Reds, but she must have wanted to think otherwise.

“Pant, pant. I-I can’t take much more of walking on this unpaved dried mud.”

“Even so, isn’t it a little soon to be out of breath, Filinion? And watch out for the subway exit. We threw a bunch of food in there to lure the Reds.”

Todoroki Tower’s impressive height had been visible from the beginning, but it took an awfully long time to arrive there.

It did not take long for the girls to be hit by the exhaustion of someone pursuing an ever-receding oasis mirage in the scorching desert.

“Almost there...”

“Yes.”

They had crossed a line.

The red dress girl finally stepped inside Roppongi Hills’ large grounds.

The tight skirt suit woman pointed here and there.

“Check. There’s a tank buried there and an armored truck a little further away. They’re both in position to directly target Todoroki Tower.”

“There isn’t as much of a rotting smell in the wind as I expected. Maybe the downpour cleared out the air.”

If so, the current dry season was dangerous. It was possible a large group of Red Iberian Orcs would be drawn in by the rotting stench in the wind. Who could say when that would lead them to Tokyo Middletown where the three maid sisters were?

“Hey, Beatrice. Couldn’t we spread around something that smells even worse than the Bills? There are plenty of options: those cheeses rich people love, floral-scented toilet paper, and so on.”

“It’s not just about the intensity of the smell. They’re specifically choosing the rotting smells and smells of life. You can’t fool a drug-sniffing dog at the airport by wrapping the plastic package in niche cheese, right? Well, this is worse than that.”

“Hm...?”

The swirly glasses girl looked straight up and groaned like a child.

Despite the sun not being out, she still held a hand over her eyes as she viewed Todoroki Tower, the largest building of Roppongi Hills. The name alone may have been known from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, if not the other side of the globe.

The Gate they were after was on the observation deck at the 52nd floor.

In the moonlight, they could see some giant forms moving near a broken window.

“Um, what do we do now? Since the stench didn’t spread around, it looks like the Iberian Orcs gathered inside Todoroki Tower.”

They could not get inside if the building was infested. Encountering the Red Iberian Orcs outside was risky enough, so it was plain as day what would happen if they tried to break through those monsters who could beat down a 1000m dragon while they were inside a building with plenty of cover and blind spots.

That left only one option.

“Let’s draw them outside,” coldly stated the red dress girl.

This was no time to worry about the fact that these were Iberian Orcs just like Boo Boo. If the counterattack using Summon Hunter Gruagach succeeded, they could be nonlethally restrained. The three girls had to focus all their efforts on that.

“I’ll handle the first attack. Filinion, Armelina, you two maintain a position that lets you set up a crossfire from the ‘stationary turrets’. When the Reds come running in response to the noise, start attacking them.”

“Hold on, youngest girl. If anyone’s playing the decoy, it’s me! These

movement assistance suits were borrowed from my station, so I know how to use them best.”

“Why would we use our strongest trump card as a decoy? C’mon, let’s get started.”

By the time she said that, the red dress girl was already moving. Thanks to the suit she wore below her dress, she easily jumped over to a tank with just its turret sticking out of the dried mud, opened the hatch, and hopped inside.

“Oh, honestly.”

“Guess we have to do it. Filinion, you take the north. I’ll take the armored truck to the west. Once the battle starts, I doubt we’ll have time to use up all our ammo, so just scatter the shells around and create an IED minefield.”

“I’m sorry, but that included some muddy camouflage-colored jargon that makes it hard for a college girl to understand. Anyway, whoever has a chance will enter Todoroki Tower with the maid’s tablet, right?”

While they discussed their plans, they ran across the dried mud to reach the scrap metal a few hundred meters away. Meanwhile, the red dress girl chose the shaped charges from the tank’s remaining ammunition, lifted them up, and threw them around the tank. There was of course an art to making traps. If she really wanted to use those as IEDs, it would be more effective to dig a pit in the mud and aim the tip upwards, but she could not spend that much time on it. After spreading them out a fair bit, she ducked back into the hatch.

She put on a headset that was still inside.

Most tanks were meant to be operated by a group of 3 to 5, but she sat in the gunner’s seat. The battery still seemed to be functioning, so the system came to life when she touched the LCD panel with her fingertip. Instead of being like a large crane operated with several levers, it was more like a shooting video game.

(Filinion and Armelina are in position too.)

The tight skirt suit woman had said they did not have to worry about loud engine noises if they only used what could be operated with battery power. The red dress girl hesitantly held down the triangular cursor on the edge of the

screen to turn the entire turret and made sure the armored vehicles a few hundred meters away in different directions had their guns aimed her way. Then she moved the turret again and altered the vertical angle to aim at her target. She chose the type of shell on the bottom right corner of the screen and it was automatically loaded.

She aimed at the window on the 52nd floor of Roppongi Hills's Todoroki Tower.

She switched the camera mode to night vision and IR to check on the location of the Red Iberian Orcs. One was larger than the rest, so that may have been the one the Sage had called the elder.

She slowly exhaled to mentally prepare herself.

It felt like a game to the very end.

She aligned the crosshair cursor on the middle and placed her finger on the giant silhouette.

Even with the specialized headset, the great roar and shock felt like they were splitting her head apart and her vision wavered. Thanks to that, she missed the moment of impact on the screen. After holding a hand to her dizzy head and checking again, she saw the area around the 52nd floor's window was obscured by gray dust. She could not tell if it had worked or not. The girl decided to change the camera to IR mode.

But just before she did, the sound of blowing air tore through the curtain of dust. It was audible even at her distance. The red mass of muscle had fought back without a moment's hesitation. The 52nd floor was approximately 250 meters up, but he ignored that height as he descended like a meteor.

(Did he notice the turret's movement even though it's running on a battery?)

She did not have time to load another shell and aim at him. The red dress girl used the screen to switch to auto-fire mode to scatter machinegun fire at the approaching foot soldier and then she rolled out of the gunner's seat.

She heard the sound of bending metal.

The tank was compressed like a suspended ceiling. No, the entire turret was

crushed down like an empty can.

The girl just barely avoided being crushed by the thick metal and she chose one of the surviving hatches to leave the tank.

She heard the deep sound of breathing and smelled a bestial odor.

A nearly 5m body had pierced the crushed turret with a thick steel beam. The mass of dark red muscle slowly turned toward her.

She was already within lethal range.

The red dress girl collapsed back onto the dried mud.

A moment later, light flashed in the darkness.

The crossfire arrived from two directions.

Just like thunder, the sound arrived after a brief delay. The shells that the soft and fluffy blonde shrine maiden and tight suit woman launched from the armored vehicles were no different from those fired by the tank. They targeted the Iberian Orc elder's giant body with an estimated muzzle velocity of more than Mach 5.

With an explosive roar, the dress girl was sent airborne by covering fire meant to protect her.

"...———!?"

Without the movement assistance suit from the police officer, she might have botched the landing and broken a few limbs. The girl worked to recover by spinning in the air so her dress's skirt drew a crescent moon shape behind her and landing lightly on her toes, but that was not enough to relax.

They had never thought they could defeat the Red Iberian Orcs with *only* modern military might.

A copper-colored mass of muscles jumped down from several floors up. Also, the elder appeared from the dust despite being targeted by two smoothbore guns firing from different directions. There were some burns on his red body, but there was not even any noticeable bleeding. The steel beam in his hand, however, had half melted away. He had let the shells hit the beam in order to alter their trajectory and avoid a direct hit.

This monster could react in the world of Mach 5, so mechanical assistance or not, he could not be escaped on human legs.

But the red dress girl had had a different reason for putting some distance between them.

Just as several more Iberian Orcs jumped down to the surface, she pulled a metal tape measure from the small bag hanging from her shoulder. Each of the girls had selected their own weapons and survival goods. The soft and fluffy blonde-haired swirly glasses shrine maiden would have a collection of chemical bottles like hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide, while the tight suit glasses woman would have a handgun or something.

The red dress girl mostly had items for starting fires and triggering explosions, such a metal measuring tape for making sparks and a compressed gas cylinder for a portable stove.

She swung the metal measuring tape like a whip and accurately struck the tip of one of the shells she had scattered around the tank – specifically, the fuse portion.

These IEDs were simple explosives made from existing shells or aerial bombs.

She continued the process.

Explosions and shockwaves scattered about.

“Kh...”

To repeat, they had almost zero chance of defeating the Reds with *only* modern military might.

Once she had created all sorts of noise and drawn the attention of the Iberian Orcs inside the Bills’s Todoroki Tower, it was time to really get to work.

The crossfire from two directions was still ongoing. It was heavy machinegun fire. The swirly glasses girl and cool glasses woman were apparently sticking to their armored vehicles, so the red dress girl was the closest to the broken windows of Todoroki Tower.

After a large wave of her hands as a sign, she ran across the elevated ground of dried mud. A few of the Red Iberian Orcs reacted, but they were briefly

obstructed by an even more intense hail of gunfire.

She half rolled into the building.

She was immediately surrounded by a sweet and sour odor.

She grimaced.

(Is this the stench Filinon and Armelina were talking about? It is pretty strong...)

It reminded her of when the second of the three maid sisters had made rhinoceros beetle traps in the summer. The darkness was even deeper in here, but she did not have the guts to turn on the lights. Just like most resort hotels and broadcast towers, Roppongi Bills's Todoroki Tower had turned its lower levels into a large shopping mall to bring in general visitors. The black twintail girl found herself in an area that really did seem like a crucible of rotting food.

They had to settle this before the wind carried this stench to Tokyo Middletown where they were sheltering – before the three maid sisters and the other survivors were killed by the Reds.

The girl used the power of the movement assistance suit to run up a motionless escalator. Just as they had planned in advance, she stayed near the windows as much as possible.

But not just because of the moonlight.

A nearby wall came crashing down and a new giant form appeared. Just as she had feared, not all of the Iberian Orcs had been lured out. Some of the Reds had remained inside their den. This one had clumps of bent metal in each fist. The girl was not sure why at first, but she eventually realized they were small single-person cars. In an Iberian Orc's hands, heavy masses like that could be used like brass knuckles.

(...Haruka would probably faint if she knew I was familiar with violent terms like "brass knuckles".)

The Red struck his fists solidly together, sending orange sparks everywhere.

The girl had no reason to fight unless necessary.

Her top priority was rewriting the settings for the Gate on the 52nd floor's

viewing platform and summoning Summon Hunter Gruagach from there. Sticking around to deal with every single enemy would be the height of folly.

The Iberian Orc turned his head toward the dress girl as she prepared to ignore the escalator's height difference by jumping straight up to the next floor.

That was when a hail of gunfire entered through a window.

Hit just before he jumped, the Red with scrapped cars in his hands rolled down to the lower floor while his weight destroyed the escalator.

Once one of the girls had entered Roppongi Hills's Todoroki Tower, they were to stay near the windows as much as possible. That way they could receive covering fire from the tanks and armored vehicles buried in the mud.

(That said, it's only if we can. Filinion and Armelina have to be desperately alternating between moving and attacking from turrets in order to survive, so they can't guarantee me support.)

She could not use the elevators with the power out. There was only a direct elevator to the 52nd floor viewing deck, but she had never been planning to use that. If the Iberian Orcs rushed in while she was in a narrow pit with no hope of covering fire from outside, death was the only option.

But with the movement assistance suit, she could head up at the same speed as an elevator. She still had to go through the nerve-racking process of keeping an eye out for enemies and moving while the Iberian Orcs could make a surprise attack at any moment, but she did have some chance of escaping.

"Kh."

The red dress girl came to a stop on a stairway landing.

The way up was blocked by a few bent vending machines. She doubted the belligerent Reds would have created a protective barricade, so they may have simply dug out the drinks and snacks before discarding the machines.

She could move them out of the way if she had to, but she wanted to avoid any unnecessary noise. More than that, staying in one place was dangerous.

She slowly made her way back down the stairs.

Such a large building would have more than one emergency staircase. If she

cut across the floor, she was bound to find another way up.

The red dress girl tapped her heel on the hallway floor and listened to the sound.

“Good, it’s thin enough.”

As soon as a new Iberian Orc stepped in front of her, its giant form was dragged down to the floor below as if it had been caught in a pitfall. With their weight and speed, a single step created a great burden. It was entirely possible that they would break right through the floor.

The red dress girl used the support of the special suit to just barely jump over the few meters of the hole in front of her and then she continued up. She was fortunate the large building had multiple emergency stairs. A single way up would have increased the risk of encountering them.

The girl removed the lid from a 500mL plastic bottle she carried in her small bag and she tossed it down the stairs she no longer needed. It contained an assortment of fatty meats that had started to spoil. It was meant as a decoy for drawing the attention of unmanageable stray dogs and dangerous pets, but it could also be used to mislead the Iberian Orcs who had excellent noses and who converted rotting stench into hunger.

(The food here is spoiling, so maybe we could acquire some contagions for use against the Reds: cholera, dysentery, norovirus, O157... No, with conditions as they are, we wouldn’t be able to manage it safely. It’s useless if we infect ourselves with our own demon.)

The red dress girl received covering fire from the windows several more times along the way and she finally reached the upper levels of Todoroki Tower that had once been a status symbol for corporate workers.

Things were going well.

The situation was like a cup of water with the surface tension straining at the limit, but it did not spill. Even if fighting all of the Reds at once was a hopeless endeavor, she could somehow manage if she used speed to lose them and made her way further in. She could almost feel victory in her grasp.

The wall labelled “50th Floor” was cracked and crumbled.

Had the Iberian Orcs made some bold reforms, or had her allies' covering fire done this? The outer wall and ceiling had collapsed in one area. The red dress girl had been thinking of opening a hole or two *with her own power*, but now she did not need to waste any gas cylinders. She climbed up onto the slope of fallen rubble.

(Armelina's movement assistance suit is pretty impressive. Doing this without it would have been more exhausting than visiting a shrine 100 times in a row.)

"Whoops."

She felt a tug as her long red skirt unleashed a scream. It had apparently caught on a protruding piece of rebar. She had to avoid doing that because it would make Haruka sad.

The large viewing deck was her goal, but it was also a dead end – possibly literally so. She would be forced to stop moving for a few minutes while she waited in front of the Gate. That was a short time, but it meant she could no longer use her previous tactics.

She found a large, donut-shaped floor used to enjoy the night view of Tokyo in all 360 degrees.

Now, it was a chilling sight since the view was as dark as a great forest. She could not even see the Detached Magic Palace. She slipped through the partition that was now just a large frame and searched for her objective. The other world was more of a prized product than the view of Tokyo, so the Gate was placed in the very middle of the floor.

(Honestly, and you can get to Ground's Nir all the same no matter where you Sign In from. Why do the Japanese love geographical status symbols so much?)

She pulled out the tablet given to her by Iroka of the three maid sisters.

She also pulled out a generic cable that could transfer both power and data and she connected it to the control panel attached to a corner of the square pedestal, like the temperature control of an electric carpet. Iroka must have been thoughtful in how she set it up because the tablet's screen did not light up in the darkness. But the small green light on the Gate's control panel did flash irregularly.

(Okay, looks like the auto-run program is running. That just leaves...)

The sound of shattered glass being crushed underfoot reached her from multiple directions.

She only had to wait until the appropriate time.

But that simple task was transforming into a hellish ordeal.

“ ... ”

The red dress girl picked up a shard of glass while making sure not to cut her fingers and she waved it near the window. She used the moonlight's reflection to send a signal down to her companions on the surface. That would tell them she had reached the 52nd floor and the operation had moved to the next phase.

Then she reached for her prized weapon.

The red dress girl pulled out a metal measuring tape and several compressed gas cylinders for a portable stove. She did not have to think about winning. She had to buy time. They would keep the Iberian Orcs flinching back with her explosives and the gunfire from the windows. Everything would change once Summon Hunter Gruagach arrived. She could use Demon Lord Tselika's Charm Skill to forcibly bind a contract with the Red Iberian Orcs, suppress their rampage, and allow the humans to borrow their strength.

However.

An unpleasant sensation surrounded Beatrice's entire body. Especially her long hair. When she realized what was causing the slight straining sensation in her hair, the worst premonition of all ran down her spine.

Now, a question.

What had the three maid sisters been trying to predict using a makeshift hygrometer made from this same hair?

The change to the situation was truly sudden.

The many sounds fused together into a giant mass of noise.

It was the beating of a great many water drops.

(Oh, no...)

What this meant gradually sank in for the red dress girl.

Unpleasant sweat poured from her body.

(A downpour now? The dry season has switched to the rainy season!?)

The surface changed greatly between the two seasons. What had been dry and solid ground would absorb the water and become a muddy torrent that swept away trees and houses. The two companions providing covering fire from armored vehicles and tanks would not escape this unscathed. Only the Red Iberian Orcs with their overwhelming weight and muscles could move through that torrent.

“Filinion, Armelina...!?”

She did not have it in her to look down.

No, she could not afford to look away.

She heard low, rumbling snorts. And they entirely surrounded the dress girl. The large viewing deck was a wide open area, but it did have some cover: the elevator, the guidance counter, the bathrooms, and the shops. She could feel her chest tightening. She clicked her tongue and threw a gas cylinder, but she knew all too well she was no match for them on her own.

The Gate’s control panel still had the flashing green light where the tablet was connected by a generic cable. The work was not yet complete. There was no chance of Gruagach arriving quite yet.

It was time for the selection.

The Red Iberian Orcs forcibly attacked all lifeforms to test their strength. If the lifeform proved too weak, they would eat it and convert it into energy. If it proved strong enough, they would mate with it to acquire in its strong points. Either way, the target’s fate would be unilateral and unreasonable.

Humanity’s turn had finally arrived.

There was no escape. No convenient savior would arrive.

A powerful pressure focused between her eyebrows, like a bowstring being

slowly drawn.

A burning impatience sizzled at the nape of her neck.

Just then, a brilliant bolt of lightning stabbed down into the lightning rod at the top of Roppongi Bills's Todoroki Tower.

"!?"

(Oh, no...!!)

The red dress girl began to move, as if pushed on by the blinding light and deafening boom, but then she realized she had jumped the gun. She had been so fearful of her fate that she had started moving at the wrong time. That was blatantly obvious to her.

Her metal measuring tape bent like a whip and solidly struck the portable stove gas cylinder she had thrown onto the floor. The side of the cylinder ruptured, orange sparks scattered, and then a large explosion erupted out.

But she already knew how it would end.

The many Reds ignored the curtain of flames and shrapnel as they charged straight toward her.

She should have made her explosive attack now, not when the lightning struck.

Only the tail end of the attack tore into the porcine giants. The red dress girl tensed up and tried to take a step backwards, but then something horrifying happened. Something flashed in the darkness. By the time she realized it came from an Iberian Orc's hand, a powerful high-voltage current was piercing her entire body.

"Kah!?"

Unable to handle the unexpected attack, she rolled backwards. She could not get back up from the glass-strewn floor. She bent backwards like a shrimp and her tensed limbs would not listen to her commands.

She wondered if the high-voltage current had damaged the movement assistance suit, but that was not it.

Her tongue and lips were also convulsing irregularly, so she could not even scream properly. It was her body that refused to move. The movement assistance suit would amplify even the smallest strength, but it would do nothing for her if she could not give it any commands.

(Elec...tricity? Wait, no...that was Magic!? Oh, I get it. We can earn Experience Points and learn Magic in the other world, but Earth is another world for the Reds...)

The Iberian Orcs were strong enough already, but now they had learned Magic too.

She had known their minds possessed abnormally high processing power. They had messed with the Gates without using Shining Weapons in order to reach Earth from Ground's Nir.

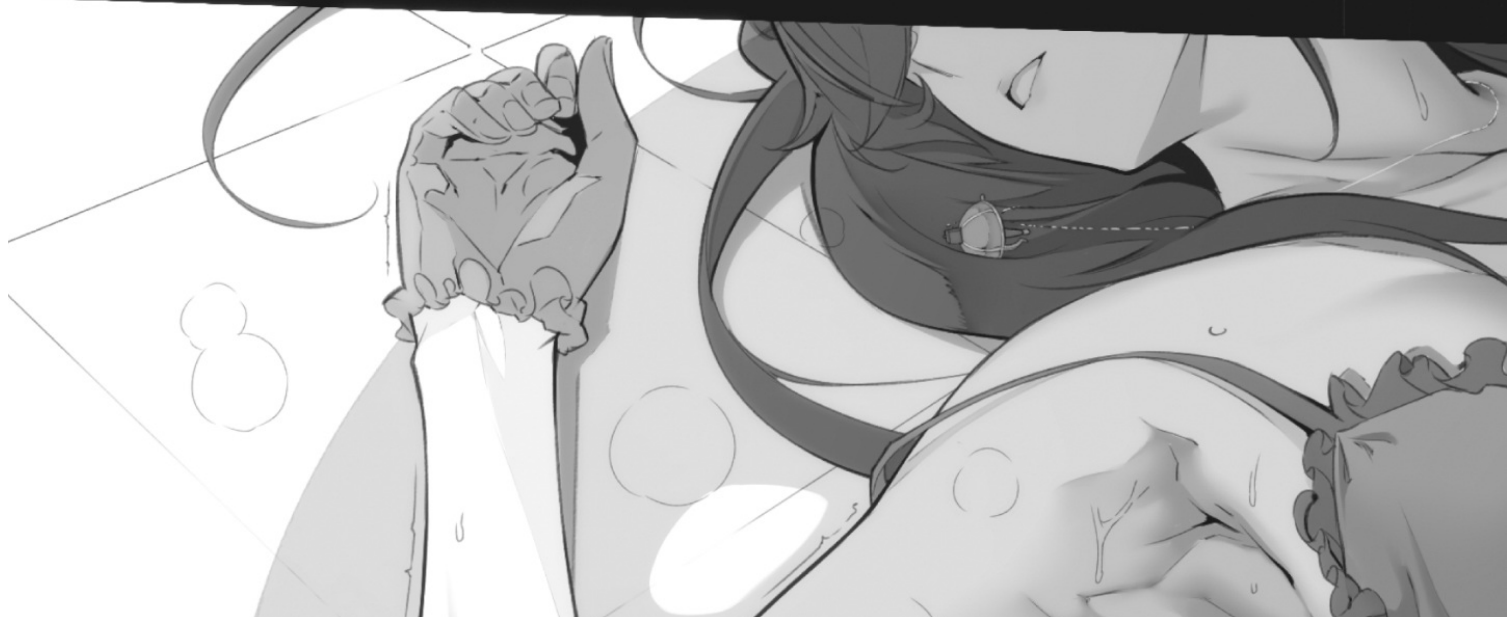
But even then, could they really take it this far?

Did they have to steal the one advantage Earth's humans had?

"Ah, ah, ah gwaaaahhh...!!"

She desperately tried to get up and grab the metal measuring tape, but her irregularly twitching hand would not move properly.

The girl could not resist at all as she lay sprawled out on the floor.



The Red Iberian Orcs ignored the slight burns and lacerations as their large hands approached her. She saw nothing more than hands, hands, hands, and more hands that did not belong to Boo Boo. She had the metal measuring tape and the explosives, but they were useless when she could not move. The odds of success had been near hopeless once she had lost the covering fire, but now they had truly closed off.

Yes, closed off. The despair was like having a set of double doors slowly closing right in front of her.

The light vanished from before her eyes and only darkness ruled her vision.

(Boo...Boo...!?)

The overwhelming masses approached all the same.

The test, and the tragic fate to follow, had begun.

Between the Lines 1

The strategic VR simulation using Ground's Nir Abyss's processor core has been ended.

The simulation participants' sensory information, primarily pain, have been forcibly shut off and scrubbed. The mental health standards were manually altered from the recommended settings, so the memories of any unrecommended results will not be scrubbed and will be retained. Please use them for reference.

(Click for details.)

The result was defeat. During the 108 hours, 23 minutes, and 49 seconds of simulation time, which was cut off from real time, all of the participants were incapacitated and unable to complete their objective. Numerous alternate patterns can be considered, but in all of them, the Red Iberian Orcs' selection process will reach the human race within 120 hours and their descendants will gain the ability to remain on Earth indefinitely.

(Click for details.)

Based on the above data, none of the available options will allow a comeback if countermeasures are taken only once the Red Iberian Orcs become active.

They are currently in a dormant state.

Not only did the Iberian Orcs place their own bodies in a dormant state out of the fear of going berserk, but several of the Level Cappers assisted using Magic to freeze and tranquilize them. However, this is no more than a temporary stalling tactic and this dormant state will not last forever.

(Click for details.)

If a drastic countermeasure is not found during this waiting period, there is no hope of resolving the problem. The Redness infecting the Iberian Orcs must be analyzed and a method of removing it must be found.

(Click for details.)

All participants will now be disconnected.

Goodbye for now, everyone.

Chapter 2: Head to Heaven if You Want to Live

Part 1

“Bwah!!!???”

Her equilibrium was shaken and psychedelic colors danced at the edge of her vision. Only after repeatedly suppressing an urge to vomit did Beatrice, the Holy Swordswoman in red armor and a white miniskirt, awaken with a start. She pressed her hands against the floor, tried and failed to get up, curled up in the fetal position with her long red and silver hair fanned out around her, and fought to suppress her trembling. It was her internal organs themselves moving, not her muscles or bones.

The experience of death and defeat was powerful.

The simulation had seemed all too real, so after awakening from that vivid dream, her memories were a mess and she was very confused.

...She had predicted it to an extent, but the “conclusion” she had seen had been far too tragic. The Reds – the Iberian Orcs afflicted with some kind of disease – had filled the world with their fierce attacks. But that memory could not be mechanically erased either. Nightmare or not, none of it was unnecessary. If she threw away the acquired information instead of accumulating it, it would all be meaningless.

“Pant, pant...”

Beatrice decided to remember it all piece by piece as she wiped the sweat

from her brow.

This was Ground's Nir.

It was nighttime and she was inside a small brick house in the mountains away from the human inn town.

It was Boo Boo's house.

She was technically in the attic where Ultimate Weapon Abyss, who was missing an arm and whose neck was bent at an odd angle, was lying on her back. She looked like a silver-haired girl wearing a one-piece swimsuit with a large hole, but she was actually an artificial creation. However, she was equipped with digital thought circuits that surpassed the human brain.

Their current strategy was entirely reliant on Abyss who had two strands of mottled silver hair hanging down in front of her.

She had connected to Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina's minds, extracted the basic information as electrical signals, and constructed an accurate strategic VR simulation based on that so they could experience the coming tragedy in advance.

Abyss would be seeing Earth for the first time as the simulation host, so Beatrice felt kind of bad for sullyng her first experience like this.

"Filinion...Armelina...? Are you okay too...?"

She was answered by groans that made her think of large frogs being slowly crushed underfoot. Those two did not have it in them to maintain the mask of a kind and beautiful young woman at the moment.

In fact...

"Now I'm worried I looked this pathetic just a second ago. Pull yourselves together for my sake at least."

"You really don't show any mercy to anyone other than Boo Boo, do you?"

"You really don't show any mercy to anyone other than Boo Boo, do you?"

While speaking in the cursed voice of someone climbing up from the pit of hangover hell, White Witch Filinion dragged along her witch's hat and large cap

and Fighter Priest Armelina gave no thought for the slit in the sides of her priest's outfit as she finally managed to get up from the attic floor.

"S-so how did you two die? For me, the downpour started while I was moving from the armored truck to an attack helicopter, so I was caught in the flowing mud until the bottles of sulfuric acid and hydrochloric acid in my duffel bag broke and dragged me into a hell of my own creation..."

"I stayed in the armored truck too long, so a Red smashed it with a blunt weapon. The entire vehicle was crushed flat and then roasted in a giant explosion. What about you, Beatrice?"

".....I really don't want to talk about it....."

The dull look in her eyes was far greater than the other two's.

The Holy Swordswoman's glassy eyes were devoid of all light and that told the other two that something even worse had happened to her, so they gently lifted their feet from the gas.

"(W-was she devoured in the selection? But devoured in which way???)"

"(Shh! She's a sensitive teenager. B-besides, it only happened in virtual reality, so it's like being bit by a digital stray dog. Even if it was the worst case scenario, there's nothing to worry about. Because it was only virtual. Bwa ha ha!!)"

"Dahhh!!"

Beatrice threw her hands in the air and screamed.

The pure teenager glared at the insensitive idiots who had lifted their feet from the gas but had not considered stepping on the brakes and she spoke out half in desperation.

"They rushed at me in all directions while in mating mode, but as soon as they tackled me with their fearsome strength, I was crushed to death!! And my final line was 'nboh'. There, happy now!?"

"Crushed by a group of sweaty and horny fat men until your organs burst out of every hole? Yeah, that's pretty tragic..."

“Crushed by a group of sweaty and horny fat men until your organs burst out of every hole? Yeah, that’s pretty tragic...”

“Don’t imagine it in such detail!! And you two were either dissolved to the bone with powerful acid or blown to charred bits, right? None of our fates were anywhere close to something we could let others see. How about I describe yours in detail too!? ...And Armelina, I’m never going to forget that joke you made. That was like something an old man would say. ...Come to think of it, you are reaching that age, aren’t you?”

“Ah!? You wanna fight, Beatrice!?”

While Beatrice and Armelina got into a scuffle that doubled as the beginnings of rehabilitation, Filinion just stood there and watched with no intent of healing any wounds this caused.

Fitting for the ultimate weapon, it seemed Abyss had left some horrifying data with them. If they could replay the file in VR format and send it into someone else’s brain (pain included), it could be used as a new form of projectile weapon.

They must have caused quite a commotion because a worried face poked up from the ladder leading down to the hallway. It was far too large to be human.

“Squeal. Beatrice, what happened? I know you were taking a nap, so did you have a bad dream?”

“Oh, Boo Boo. Wait just a moment. Armelina has entered her crazy mode, so don’t look! This might be something she will seriously regret later on!!”

“Shut up! It’s long since time I taught you to respect this clever, kind, nice-smelling, and perfect young woman. I won’t be satisfied until I’ve stripped your insolent ass bare and given you 100 spankings!!”

“...Spankings as punishment? How old are you?”

“...Spankings as punishment? How old are you?”

“Don’t say that in unison, little girls!! Filinion, now I’ve added you to the war crimes list too!!”

The girls went on to grab at each other and tug things out of place like they

were mud wrestling, but their armor and miniskirts were meant for combat while exploring the harsh Labyrinth. They would not break so easily.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo was so unchanged that Beatrice thought she might cry tears of relief.

His skin had not turned red and he showed no sign of enacting that selection where the weak were eaten and the strong mated with. Yes, he alone was fine. He was not afflicted by the Red disease and that was why he alone had been allowed to escape when the village was attacked long ago.

She had known that.

She had known it, but the red armor and miniskirt girl was still so relieved that her heart trembled.

He held a hand to his mouth and spoke in a troubled voice.

“Boo. You shouldn’t fight. Abyss is sleeping, so keep it down! ...Keep this up and I might have to hit all of you as punishment.”

“That would physically crush me, so leave me out of it!!”

“That would physically crush me, so leave me out of it!!”

“That would physically crush me, so leave me out of it!!”

Even if it had been in VR, those three girls had just seen the threat of the Iberian Orcs. Boo Boo’s words led the two muscular morons to stop grappling and for some reason the White Witch joined them in sitting apologetically before him.

Boo Boo tilted his head like he did not really understand.

“So what did your nap say?”

“Ugh... The simulation only taught us that any direct attack is guaranteed to fail. We really do have to end this before the apocalyptic Reds break loose.”

“Squeal. Beatrice, you’re such a romanticist to rely on dream prophecies.”

He indeed did not understand. Beatrice was a little curious who had taught him the word “romanticist”. Had it been Succubus Tselika who had disguised herself as a Nun, had it been the Sage, or had it been Royal Elf Sibyl?

“There’s still some food left, so you can eat if you want. I made sure not to eat it all for your sakes. I can restrain myself if I try!”

“...W-well, I think I can handle some porridge. So what’s on the menu?”

“Meat. You can never go wrong with meat! Serve meat and there will be a smile on everyone’s face!!”

Beatrice and the others were concerned about that fairly vague response, but they still followed Boo Boo from the attic and to the ground floor. There must have been further additions built because there was a second floor in between.

The hand-sized Fairies had built his house with a fireplace and chimney, but it did not have a kitchen with a hand pump well or brick oven, so when eating, he generally built a campfire outside and had a barbecue.

They stepped outside to find Ground’s Nir’s peaceful blue sky.

It was not harshly divided between a dry season and rainy season, and everything would not be swept away by mud after a sudden downpour.

Also, it seemed Boo Boo had not made the food. The hand-sized Fairies named Meridiana, Alice, and Morgan were flying around while Fairy Queen Suttriona used both hands to deal with a (Boo Boo-sized) skewer of meat and Giant Onion like it was a barbell.

That Break News had a black ribbon dress wrapped around her skinny, undeveloped body, and the large floral decorations shook as she casually spoke.

“Oh, so you’re up. You didn’t have much luck, did you? Just making an estimate from the size of their skeleton and muscles, they’re far beyond what mere humans can handle. I know you’re disheartened, but eat some tasty food and cheer up.”

The food was a lot like skewers of grilled chicken, but each piece of meat rivaled a one-pound steak in size. If a pound does not mean much to you, you can convert that into about 450 grams. Each one would probably be too big to fit in a girl’s small bento box. A single skewer contained enough meat to shock a Westerner and Beatrice had to avert her gaze since her stomach was still squirming a little.

And an odd scene came into view.

There was red, red, red, and more red as far as the eye could see.

Those powerful and horrifying Iberian Orcs were curled up and arranged in neat rows.

“ ... ”

The way they had crouched down, curled up, and come to a complete stop made them look like giant eggs laid on the ground. But these red eggs of slaughter would bring about the end of the world once they hatched.

They had not accepted their own rampage.

They had not accepted the Redness afflicting them as an excuse.

So they had used all their might to suppress their power and entered a dormant state. Then White Witch Filinion’s tranquilizer potions and Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau’s low-temperature treatment had externally reinforced that state.

Of course, this was only a temporary calm that came with a time limit. If that had solved everything, Beatrice’s Party would not have been continuing their trial and error tests.

White Witch Filinion poked at the side of her glasses and spoke.

“We can’t actually solve this with Gruagach’s Summon Hunter power like we were trying in the simulation, right?”

“Right. That requires both sides to accept the contract, so the Iberian Orcs have to be awake for it to work. Gruagach could easily get their consent using Tselika’s Charm, but there is no stopping the Reds’ rampage once they wake up, so we would be right back where we started.”

Huldra, a miniskirt cheerleader with pink twintails and pompoms whose behavior was so overly cutesy it felt fake, casually joined the conversation.

“Chief, I’ve learned how to administer the crucial tranquilizer potion, but it doesn’t look like I can Mix it. The White Witch threw in Sutriona’s blood wings and Ireana’s roots for some kind of unique potion that’s just too dangerous for me to copy.”

“Heh. What a pain. Sounds like no one can do anything without my peerless genius around. Grin, grin.”

“Wipe that smug grin off your face, cow. If no one but you can make it, it means we can’t get a stable supply, which leaves us in big trouble.”

After Armelina’s exasperated response, curly blue-haired Wildefrau approached while holding a skewer of only vegetables. She spoke while nearly nude except for the cross sword she wore.

“Either way, the low-temperature treatment is entirely reliant on me. Simply freezing them with a great enough power would be one thing, but safely guiding them to hibernation without harming them is something else entirely. Grin, grin, grin.”

“What is it with all of you and your smug grins!? We’re not here to brag about how powerful we are! Quite the opposite!! What we want is a generic ability, not a unique one!!”

If even one of the Reds surrounding them were to awaken, they would be attacked by the scenario seen in the strategic VR simulation put together by Abyss. Once that red apocalypse began, it was all over. It was human nature to want as many safeties in place as possible.

For now, the girls began a strategy meeting while accepting one of the Boo Boo-sized skewers and deciding to share it since it was too much for one person.

Beatrice let out a slow breath and started speaking.

“To be blunt, how long will this dormant state last?”

“Theoretically, about 10 hours, but the actual limit is fairly fluid. Who knows how much it could shrink based on external stimuli. Munch.”

“Wait, Wildefrau has a vegetable skewer, so if we’re going to share one, let’s go grab a meat one. Meat!”

“Eh heh heh. The fatty meat is so good. This really is the best. Munch, munch.”

“...Are you serious? I’m a guy and even I’m a little disturbed by how extreme

an athletic festival this feels like. Well, if that's what you like, I'll leave it to you, glasses girl. Munch."

The girls(?) held a hand to the side of their head to keep the dripping grease from their hair as they bit into the meat with their small mouths.

The red-armored and white miniskirted Holy Swordswoman struggled with the large meat as she continued the discussion.

"External stimuli? You mean – munch – you think there could be an attack?"

"Once the scope of the threat reaches them, I imagine some people will think this dormant state is the perfect time to attack. Munch, munch."

"Even though Level Cappers like us couldn't even dislocate a single joint in an attack, huh?"

It was cruel, but Beatrice's Party had already considered preventing the Iberian Orcs from moving any of their limbs to prevent the disaster. In the end, those representative examples of the Level Cappers were unable to even scratch that copper skin and their only accomplishment was possibly hastening the time limit with the pain signals.

Their opponents were that untouchable even while asleep.

How much worse would it be once they woke up and their violence blossomed?

The simulation led by Abyss had provided the answer to that.

"But won't a lot of people refuse to believe it until they try it for themselves? Offense isn't my specialty, so it doesn't really make sense to me. Mm, lick..."

"...Filinion, I know you don't want that dripping meat juice to go to waste, but you really shouldn't hold out your hands and catch it on your tongue."

"I bet that glasses cow would catch the meat in her cleavage if it fell off the skewer. Then she'd close one eye and shout 'hot...!' "

"Yeah, she is a glasses girl."

"It's like she's just asking to get the grease all over the lenses. ...And, chief, don't you wear glasses back in reality?"

“Attention, everyone!! Weren’t we holding a strategy meeting!!!???”

Perhaps thanks to the blessing of vegetables, Wildefrau remained relatively sane and steered them back on course. In a way, the fact that all their insults did not cause their friendships to break down was proof that their bonds were real.

“Mm. Hey, Filinion, you still don’t know what exactly the Redness is, right?”

“Their blood rusts over. It may be something like a hereditary disease that came about in the process of evolving in a more aggressive direction. Munch. But I’ve checked through their body tissue and I can’t find any abnormality like that. There’s no difference in the chromosomes between the elder’s group and healthy Boo Boo and there’s no sign of toxins, bacteria, or other foreign substances. And when compared to Boo Boo, I can’t find any nutrient they’re missing. On the physical front, they should be healthy as can be.”

No matter how much they bit and tore off pieces of the meat, it never seemed to grow smaller, but someone had made it for them. Armelina was an adult, so she refused to look displeased with it as she spoke up.

“But the Reds are definitely in an abnormal state, right? Munch, munch.”

“Yes. So that means there isn’t anything wrong with them *as far as I can investigate*. And if a recovery-specialty Level Capper like me can’t get to the bottom of it, it must be something really well hidden.”

“Well, the Sage has mastered all Magic with no gaps whatsoever, but not even she could cure them. I guess we didn’t need the cow to tell us it isn’t something so simple.”

“Did you...did you have to do that!? I went to the trouble of making a grim expression for that great line, so why would you bring up someone else to obliterate my own name value!? Beatrice! Look me in the eye! Dammit, you’re wearing armor, so you can’t read your palm no matter how hard you stare at it!! W-waaaaahhhhn!!”

Another girl used her small mouth to join the giant meat eating challenge. The long ears sticking out from her glossy blonde hair twitched as she spoke.

“Munch, munch. What the humans are going to do is obvious enough from

observing their inn town. They're all raising war cries and preparing for a hunt in the mountains. They sure have a lot of excess energy when they're still rebuilding the town after the Underworld battle."

"Sibyl?"

Even though she wore a green miniskirt dress with the chest wide open and ate this overly sumptuous feast by brushing her fine hair back and tearing off pieces of meat with her small mouth, the Royal Elf looked somehow refined.

"People lose control more easily when acting out of fear than out of anger. From the look of things, I doubt you could stop them from making their attack if you tried to persuade them now. Of course, even if the humans join together and attack the dormant Reds, they cannot kill them. They will only shorten the time limit. But at the same time, there are so many of them. Preventing a single piece of Magic from hitting the Reds is unrealistic. We will have to assume a shortened time limit in whatever we do."

"I get that, but is what you said before really true?"

"Yes."

Beatrice's comment could have been seen as a challenge or a simple question, but Sibyl responded with a composed expression.

"...Munch. The Sage has lost her cool and is no help whatsoever since this has to do with the Iberian Orc elder. As a ruler, I have decided that the shortest route to regaining control of Ground's Nir is to guide you and indirectly achieve my objective. Munch, munch."

"Th-this princess sure can eat."

"I kind of like this. I did run the meat-focused Girl's Grill when we were in the inn town, if you recall. And as the proud ruler of the forest, my metabolism works differently from you humans. I need not blind myself with external looks, bind myself with an excessive aesthetic focus, and pathetically restrict my diet."

"Is this elitist just saying she can eat whatever she wants without gaining weight? Y'know, that concept that might as well be picking a fight with the female half of the population! Do we have to start a war of the worlds against that unreasonably thin body!!!???"

Armeline was filled with dark hatred, but Royal Elf Sibyl ignored her and maintained her elegant image as she continued.

“To find a drastic solution to the Redness afflicting the Iberian Orcs, we need the hidden treasures guarded by the three royal families, which includes me. I believe that was what we had discussed.”

Part 2

If they were going to share so much food, couldn't they just remove it from the skewer? Beatrice's Party eventually arrived at that most basic of questions, so they moved the humongous pieces of meat onto large plates, transforming the meeting into a party with the plates sitting on stumps instead of a table. ... Boo Boo and Sutriona were clearly abnormal for eating a seemingly endless number of those skewers.

"So what are the three royal families' hidden treasures?"

Sibyl resumed speaking in her green dress with the chest wide open.

She used a knife to cut off a small piece of the giant meat.

"To be honest, there is a strong tradition saying we must protect them, but we don't actually remember why. I admit it's kind of pathetic. The breakthrough came from Demon Lord Tselika. Without her and Skull Wave, I never would have realized the true meaning of the three treasures."

Sibyl, Tselika, the Sage, and Skull Wave... Those four stood quite near the peak, so they must not have wanted any connections between each other. Sibyl and the Sage had worked together and there was a connection between Tselika and Skull Wave, but that was all. They had been satisfied with their small groups and had never had a chance to exchange much information.

The strongest did not let the loneliness get the better of them. Instead, to avoid the annoyance of speaking with people of differing values, they had intentionally distanced the people who would never understand them – or that they had assumed would never understand them. That was a bitter experience that Beatrice herself had gone through in the past.

Boo Boo had changed all that.

Just as his actions had opened Beatrice's lonely heart of the strongest, he had

broken through so many people's shells and given them a chance to connect with others. If he had only been strong, he would only have violently beaten them down and forced them to obey. If he had only been kind, he would have been killed in a counterattack. It was only by possessing both qualities that he had managed to open so many people's hearts.

Sibyl breathed an emotional sigh.

"Demon Lord Tselika is a collector with her own treasure trove in the Cave of Tears and, according to her, if you gather those three treasures, you will have a tool for viewing and understanding the composition of all matter in this world. Because of the many possibilities and even greater risks that entails, it was split in three and each piece was left with the ruler of the land, sea, or air for safekeeping...no, to be sealed away. And if Skull Wave is to be believed, it could be used as a largescale observation device like an electron microscope or particle accelerator."

"A-a particle accelerator? And since this has to do with Ground's Nir, it could break through the limits of Earth technology...? Th-th-th-this doesn't mean you could create as much as you wanted of curium, einsteinium, californium, and other dangerous things, does it? Chief, if you created enough of that to be visible to the naked eye, it would cause a nuclear revolution in this world of Magic, and people could create super hydrogen bombs the size of your little finger."

"That was only a figure of speech...I hope."

Huldra and Armelina grew pale and whispered to each other, but Beatrice was focused elsewhere.

...Healing Expert Filinion had only just said that she could not find the cause even though the effect was clearly there, so the cause had to be buried somewhere deeper than she could see. With better equipment, perhaps Filinion would be able to deal with the mysterious Redness.

A hereditary disease, an infectious disease, a toxin, an immunodeficiency, the lack of a nutrient, or the inability to synthesize an internal substance...

It was unclear what the issue was, so they could not imagine what the appropriate response was. If all you had was $X+Y=Z$, you could not find the

answer. But if you had fixed values for two of the three variables, you could solve for the remaining one. Before using heating or cooling for distillation or mixing some chemicals, they needed to observe the cause. Just like a crossword puzzle, filling in one answer helped reveal the answers around it.

By identifying the cause, they could work out the technique needed to eradicate the disease.

That technique might be hidden somewhere in the Magic tree diagrams that Beatrice and the others viewed on a regular basis. The glutamic acid that was expected to work as an antidote to a certain toxin was easily acquired by boiling seaweed, and cutting edge labs used normal pig and cow blood to create serums. In older times, such things had been treated as suspicious good luck charms, but once you understood how it worked, the solution was surprisingly simple. It was like finding the right way to look at a piece of trick art.

“The hidden treasures of the three royal families, hm? So that’s how you secure your rule. By the way, you mentioned land, sea, and air, but we don’t have time for a great adventure across this entire world.”

“The land one is protected and preserved by the ruler of the forest, meaning me, so you don’t need to worry about that one.”

Royal Elf Sibyl tapped at the circlet on her forehead that carried a jewel reminiscent of hot blue fire.

That must have been one of the treasures.

“So what about sea and air?” continued Beatrice.

“The sea one belonged to Elder Mermaid Vivian, ruler of the ocean. I use the past tense because she is no longer among the living, but you would recognize her appearance. ...After all, her body was used by the Underworld Lord.”

At that point, Sibyl held her soft-looking palm out toward the others.

It held a ring with a bright jewel set in it.

It was colored a sapphire blue reminiscent of the most beautiful ice.

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau wore the same color, so she spoke up in interest.

“Did you dig that up from the Underworld...that giant marine creature that had rotted away after all its nutrients were absorbed?”

“I was the one that *cleaned up after* the Underworld Lord in the end, so I collected it then.”

“So we only need the air treasure?”

Beatrice asked that with a frown and Sibyl quietly nodded.

“The ruler of the sky is Archangel Marinka. I do not know how much the limit will be shortened, but before the Iberian Orcs wake up, we need to acquire Marinka’s sky treasure and complete the largescale observation device that can reveal the identity of the Redness afflicting them.”

“W-we can probably manage if we only have to visit one place, right? Of course, we only have about half a day, so things might change if we have to go all the way to the edge of the world and back.”

Filinion oddly hedged her comment, but Sibyl shook her head. That was enough for her beautifully shining blonde hair to sway side to side.

“Not to worry. Marinka’s location is visible from this island. In fact, with the exception of some special cases like Vampires, it is a place anyone sees on a daily basis. However, it is also a somewhat unusual location.”

“Quit acting all mysterious. This obviously isn’t going to be as easy as heading out alone and coming back with a new souvenir. Where exactly is this Marinka located?”

The fair Royal Elf answered Armelina’s question by raising her index finger.

No, she was pointing.

Pointing straight up.

“The sun.”

“...What???”

Had they misheard or was this a figure of speech? Beatrice had to ask about that entirely unexpected term, but Sibyl was not going to correct herself.

“The sun shining in the heavens beyond the sky territory. Archangel Marinka

provides the world with light from there as she awaits visitors. And she wears the final treasure: an earring bearing the jewel of the azure sky.”

Part 3

The sun.

How were they supposed to reach the sun?

“Oh, I don’t know what you’re imagining, but I am not talking about Earth’s sun. The sun that shines on Ground’s Nir is perfectly reachable on foot. ...Why are all of your mouths gaping like that? Sigh, did that just confuse you further? Then let me tell you something to strip away your foolish assumptions. We are not going to visit Earth’s sun. We will visit the *sun island* that shines on all of Ground’s Nir from beyond the sky territory.”

Sibyl explained with a composed expression, but Boo Boo had trouble understanding since he had never tried going to either world’s sun.

“Boo... That was a flying island?”

That nearly-4m gray giant had arrived at a beach where small waves washed in and out in the warm sunlight. But these were not white waves. They were black. Rotten, discolored, and sticky dead flesh clung to the coastline.

If a human from Earth had been there, they might have been reminded of a tanker accident.

That ominous image may have been why there were no humans in the vicinity. No one wanted to hang around there when the black lumps were what remained of the Underworld’s giant marine creature that had attacked the island of Ground’s Nir. Because the Sage had used up all of its nutrients to save Beatrice’s Party and the elder’s group, it had fallen apart into partially liquefied rotten flesh. It was crawling with small Cleaner Crabs and Intruder Hermit Crabs. Life was powerful. At this rate, it would be entirely gone in less than a month.

Whatever the case, he was lucky.

If Royal Elf Sibyl was right, the humans were attempting to attack the dormant Iberian Orcs in order to protect their home world of Earth. The crisis would make them indiscriminate. Boo Boo would be in danger if they spotted him.

He wore a large basket on his back that the Fairies had woven for him.

But it was not to carry fish he caught.

In fact, Fairy Queen Sutriona sat inside the basket looking quite bored. She stuck her fingers inside the chest and hip of her black ribbon dress and made a snapping noise as she spoke in a drawn-out voice.

“Yawn... Have you still not found it?”

“Sniff, sniff. Sniff, sniff... I think it’s over here.”

Boo Boo moved his giant nose to search out some kind of scent as he walked along the beach. The crescent moon shape of what looked like a rib stuck out from the water. The Underworld’s bones had shined with the bluish-white light of crystal, but they had lost their shine and become a dull white now that it was no longer active.

Boo Boo sniffed in front of a small hill of black gunk and then stuck his hand inside.

He pulled out a hard object about the size of a rugby ball.

“Found it! It’s a big tree seed!!”

“Wah!? Wait, Boo Boo! Wash it off in the water before throwing it in the basket! You got that gunk all over me!! Ugh, it’s sticking to my hair! I can’t get it out!!”

Boo Boo continued the search while carrying angry Sutriona. He would collect any kind of plant seed he found.

Suddenly, the white sand swelled up nearby.

A humanoid form burst out from the beach’s sand. It was a bewitchingly beautiful woman with purple hair and brown skin. This person wearing something like a dress made of green vines and leaves was Ileana, peak of the plant Break News. Despite her strong allure that was reminiscent of sweet

nectar, she was pouting her lips like a small child.

“Hmph. Hmph, hmph!”

“Squeal?”

“...Boo Boo, you and the perverted carrot both need to learn how to use actual words.”

As inadequate as it seemed, it apparently worked. Silver-haired Sutriona responded to the far-too-direct communication style with annoyance, so Ileana started speaking in an actual language.

“All of the plants on this island come from my All-Purpose Seeds, so they all belong to me.” Ileana puffed out her brown cheeks like dumplings. “But I don’t recognize those. They must be seeds from another island. Which means they’re invasive species! Growing those on this island would be too dangerous. They’ll take over my share!!”

After all, the Next Generation Embryo found deep inside the Underworld had been a giant towering tree. If more of those started growing on the island, the plants born of Ileana’s All-Purpose Seeds would be driven from the already limited land.

“But this is necessary.”

“Hmph?”

“Look over there, vegetable. There’s a big mountain, right?”

Boo Boo pointed toward the largest mountain on the island. Beyond the thick clouds, the peak was covered in perpetual snow.

When she saw that pure and unsullied white, Ileana held her skinny brown body and shivered.

“I have little to do with that land. Not even high-altitude plants would grow at that height.”

“Beatrice and the others need to go even higher than that.”

Boo Boo hopped up and down on the spot, sending an ominous tremor through the ground and rolling Sutriona around in the basket on his back.

“It’s called the sky territory. We went there when the Sage sent Disaster after us and we used those...floating islands, were they called? Squeal. I didn’t notice it then since we were sent there automatically, but it’s hard to get there normally.”

It was hard to see from this distance, but large rocks and clumps of dirt were positioned vertically up from the peak. According to Sibyl, they could reach the heavens using those floating islands.

Which meant they needed something else:

“Even from the mountain peak, the lowest part of the sky territory is floating around with no way to reach it, so we need these.”

“Y-you mean...?”

“Ground’s Nir’s plants won’t help, but a seed from elsewhere might do the trick.”

While Boo Boo explained, Sutriona righted herself in the basket and held up a seed larger than her face.

“It’s a bit of a gamble, but there is a precedent: the Next Generation Embryo. ...That tall tree had almost certainly been artificially redesigned, but there had to be an original tree it was based on. If we gather as many foreign seeds as we can and plant them all on the summit, one of them should instantly sprout, reach the bottom of the islands floating in the sky territory, and provide a starting foothold.”

“Noooo! There has to be some other way! Wouldn’t it be faster to ride up there on the Thousand Dragon’s back!?”

“That wouldn’t work, vegetable. I’ve never heard of her eating the sun, so I don’t think she can fly that high.”

“And unlike me and my beautiful butterfly wings, she can fly quickly but she can’t stay in one spot...hovering, did they call it? Especially not with someone on her back. And the passengers couldn’t climb onto the islands since her giant body would knock them out of the sky.”

Sutriona gave a mischievous smile from the basket as she supplied that extra

information.

“Boo. Besides, why do you not like this idea, vegetable?”

“Because...because...because there’s no guarantee it will stay on the top of the mountain. Are you sure it won’t scatter pollen and infect the entire area, or spread its roots below the ground to grow more trees? Hmph, hmph! This will never end well!!”

Boo Boo would not have considered any of that, but what about knowledgeable Sutriona?

The Fairy Queen was entirely nonchalant.

“It’s no skin off my nose if you suffer, perverted carrot. In fact, I’d probably hold my sides and laugh until I cried.”

“Hmm!!!???”

Ileana grew pale and began tearfully tugging on Boo Boo’s large hand.

“Don’t do this! Don’t do this! This feels just as ominous as finding a mysterious egg below the thick ice! Besides, nothing good will ever come from listening to a bug that’s only good for her venom!”

“Squeal?”

“You’re so good at tending to the soil, so you only need to use that talent on me. I never want to see you tending to some invasive species from who-knows-where!! Why do I have to watch those rival plants grow while I’m stuck in an untended field full of weeds!? There’s no upside for me!!”

Just then, Sutriona’s slender shoulders shook inside the basket.

She was clearly laughing.

“Peh heh heh... I see. So that’s it.”

“Hm?”

“Is the proud peak of the plants jealous? Ah hah hah! Are you that afraid of having a rival steal away your gardener, brown maiden!? Ee hee hee, ha haaa!!”

“Hmphwuh!!!?? Th-th-that-that’s not true!! You think I’m in love!? Don’t be ridiculous! I am the greatest of the plant Break News and the highest life form

that creates the foundation of the food chain supporting all other life!! Just because I was having a little fun is no reason to think I am jealous or at all worried!!!!!"

"Well, normal plants don't fall in love or get jealous, so I'm not sure what to say to that."

While the two powerful Break News argued, Boo Boo tilted his giant head.

He waved his far-too-large hand toward the Mandragora who had started tearfully looking up at him.

"Don't worry, vegetable. I won't go anywhere. I can look after that big tree and the vegetables here."

"Heh heh heh. That won't be enough for her, Boo Boo. That love-struck perverted carrot won't be satisfied unless she's the only one you're looking at. Ha ha!! It's time you learned about love, learned what it means to be a woman, and blossomed into a giant shameless flower!!!!!"

"Give it a rest, you bug. Keep it up and I'll suggest it's love that brings you to Boo Boo's place for dinner night after night when you could cook your own meat if you wanted to."

"You wouldn't dare."

"You wanna bet?"

Giant sparks flew as the two of them glared at each other with such intensity that a Chimera would be too afraid to even run away, but Boo Boo still asked a question.

"Squeal. What is love?"

"That is the extremely immature feeling that causes someone to grow all flustered just seeing you carry the watering can to another garden and then suddenly insist on having you all to herself. Just like this perverted carrot here."

"It is the meaningless force that leads someone pretend she's incompetent so she can intrude on a guy's home, have him take care of her, and act in a calculatedly cute way to stimulate a protective desire. Just like this bug here."

"I warned you!"

“Kiss my ass!!”

The two of them shouted at each other and finally rushed at each other. Boo Boo kept his head tilted as he watched the two Break News grabbing at each other’s dresses and hair while rolling along the beach.

“...Boo, can’t everyone just get along?”

Part 4

And so the attack began.

Given the situation, they could not focus everyone on a single activity.

It was time to review their information.

“First of all, if the Red-afflicted Iberian Orcs wake up, it’s all over. So we need to settle this before that happens. For that, we need the three hidden treasures protected by the three royal families. Of those, we have the two of land and sea, so we need to acquire the treasure of air. We are sending one team to do that.”

Just outside Boo Boo’s house on the busy mountainside, Holy Swordswoman Beatrice raised one finger at a time.

“The Iberian Orcs placed themselves in a dormant state, but external tranquilizers and low-temperature treatment can help. We can’t have them waking up, so we can’t let our guard down there. Another team will work to keep them asleep and extend the time limit.”

She slowly drew out the frame that divided everyone up.

“Meanwhile, the humans are showing ominous signs in the inn town. They seem to think they can defeat the Reds by attacking them all at once before they wake up from their dormant state. However, not even a group effort from us Level Cappers could break their hard skin. That stimulus would only shrink the time limit, so another team will stop the humans.”

None of the teams could afford to fail, so they could not concentrate their personnel on any one of them.

Beatrice placed a hand on her hip, sighed, and began splitting up the personnel.

“Me, Boo Boo, Filinion, Armelina, and Sibyl as a guide will aim for the sky

treasure guarded by Archangel Marinka. A mixed team led by Wildefrau and Huldra can work on keeping the Reds asleep while a mixed team led by Gruagach and Rusalka can set up a defensive line to stop the attack from the inn town. Don't forget to manage the Break News as well. ...Does that sound good?"

"Well, I don't mind, but it sounds like you will be climbing the tallest peak. Don't forget that you will need to deal with the cold yourself."

Wildefrau readily agreed, but Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra grew pale.

"Geh, geh. White Witch, you're going with them!? I can administer the tranquilizer potion, but I can't Mix it. If I run out, then that's that."

"Um, I will Mix up a bunch of the potion before I leave. More importantly, we don't know what kind of resistance we will find with Marinka and the rest of the heavenly forces, so I understand why they would want to bring our best healer along."

Now that the personnel assignment was complete, it was time to get to work.

Fighter Priest Armelina looked to the giant leather backpack Boo Boo was wearing.

"That sure is stuffed full. What's inside?"

"Boo, the gunk from the Underworld. If there aren't any nutrients on the mountain, I can spread this around and plant the seeds in it. And Filinion is carrying a lot too."

They were talking about Ground Nir's tallest mountain, but it did not take months to climb like with Mt. Everest back on Earth. That was largely due to the presence of Magic, but if they worked at it, they could manage in only about 6 hours. They already had the ability to challenge the underground Labyrinth with only the clothes on their back, so outside of the materials for the cow's Mixing, they did not need to bring much in the way of outdoors equipment.

They stood at the base of the mountain.

Royal Elf Sibyl held a twisted Shining Weapon while she stretched her arms and back upwards, pushing her flat chest out a bit.

“Nnn. Now, let’s get going. I will try to choose an ascent that is climbable by humans, but please use Magic when that is not enough. I will not help.”

“Squeal. Sibyl, have you ever met Marinka?”

“Yes, the land, sea, and air used to get along quite well. It got awkward after Vivian died, though.”

Then Armelina began laughing creepily.

“Heh heh heh.”

“Armelina?”

“Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha!! Finally. Oh, finally, there’s a girl flatter than me! Sutriona was too short to count and Kallikantzaros was cheating by having that chest with her short height! But Sibyl is plenty tall but also the flattest of us all! Thank you, the day has finally come that someone can take that title away from me!!”

“Squeal? Beatrice, can you explain what that means?”

“Don’t worry, Boo Boo. It’s nothing worth thinking about.”

Beatrice smiled confidently, but then White Witch Filinion made a merciless comment while a certain part of her jiggled.

“C’mon, you niche-demand flat-chested girls, let’s get going. I’m the indoor type, but I’m keeping my motivation high here.”

“Did you just throw me into the same category as those two!? I’m a bit above average!!”

Enraged, Beatrice snapped back with fire erupting from the top of her head, but the glasses girl only jiggled the plentiful resources held tightly between her backpack’s shoulder straps.

Armelina remained unconcerned throughout, so she must have been fine with anything other than the very bottom spot.

“I can’t stop laughing... Anyway, you’re a mountain guide, huh? Are long-eared Elves the indoor type or the outdoor type?”

“Why are you looking at my chest with that victorious look on your face? And

I would rather you did not look lightly upon the ruler of all forest-born life. The very idea that being the outdoor type signifies a lack of intelligence is an insult to all life of the forest.”

(Wait, wait. It does look like Armelina has the larger size, but isn't that only because of the muscle? I feel like Sibyl might actually *have more* going by cup size.)

“...? What's with you?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Why are you holding your hands behind your head and doing shoulder blade exercises?”

Driven by fear, Beatrice had started to become aware of her size, so the Royal Elf gave her a suspicious look.

Once they entered the mountain, Sibyl took the lead and maintained a composed expression no matter how root-covered and rocky the slope was.

Meanwhile, White Witch Filinion's hips were already trembling.

“Pant, pant, pant...”

Beatrice could not help but mimic her earlier comment.

“Ahem. Ah, ahh... ‘Um, I will Mix up a bunch of the potion before I leave. More importantly, we don't know what kind of resistance we will find with Marinka and the rest of the heavenly forces, so I understand why they would want to bring our best healer along.’ ”

“Ohhh!! I want to go back in time and punch my idiot self so hard it breaks my glasses!! I didn't even think about being the only one with any luggage!!”

“Well, you do have all that extra fat to lug around. Hey, Filinion. As corrupt as you are, you're still a White Witch, right? Then can't you Mix an energy drink or something to recover from exhaustion?”

“!? That's it!!!!!!”

“If a complete indoor type like you couldn't figure out something like that, you clearly don't have enough INT for the task. Besides, you build up a

resistance to Recovery Potions when you keep using them, so they stop working. You'll give up soon enough regardless."

Beatrice's annoyed comment put an end to that idea, but the glasses cow had still reached her limit.

And there was only one person she was going to rely on.

"B-Boo Boo..."

"Hm? I'm already carrying this big bag, so I can't lend you my back."

"...!!!???"

"W-wait," said Armelina. "I know that was a shock, but don't give me that look. I'm not climbing a mountain while carrying a backpack and two mounds of fat that aren't mine!!"

"I'll just turn you into a Fighter Priest who can't say no☆"

"I absolutely refuse to accept that humiliating title! And that genre is way too narrow!!"

The backpack cow made a fuss and filled the others with enough fear of being weighed down that she was eventually given a spot directly on Boo Boo's shoulders. His crammed-full leather backpack seemed to function as a seat.

The White Witch wrapped her arms around Boo Boo's big head like a cushion, shifted the position of her butt on the backpack, and sighed like she was soaking in a hot spring.

"Ahhh... Being freed from physical labor is such bliss."

"...I swear she's turning into a god of pestilence who is the master of sticking to last place in the railroad game..."

Armelina groaned and Beatrice frowned and trembled. Her strength had cost her a chance to show off here.

"Squeal. Stop rubbing my ears, Filinion. It tickles."

"..."

"Ow! Beatrice, don't kick me!!"

Meanwhile, Sibyl turned back in the lead and gave an exasperated sigh.

“Sigh. What are you even doing?”

That was what she said.

Yes, she definitely said that.

But that super serious long-eared Royal Elf started acting strangely once the forest’s trees disappeared and they were surrounded by nothing but snow.

“Shiver, shiver, shiver...”

“...Hey.”

“I-I-I’m fine. I-I-I-I-I-I am the Royal Elf who rules over the forest. A-a-a-a-a-a mere lack of trees is n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-not enough to trouble my I-I-I-I-I-I-leg strength built up by traversing all of the land I rule. S-s-s-s-s-so tonight we will have soup curry.”

“Your logic is a mess and I think that last part is just wishful thinking! Miss Flattest, we need you to guide us, so what are we supposed to do if you collapse first!?”

“Hmm, maybe Miss Second Flattest has trouble with the cold because she has so little subcutaneous fat.”

“Hold it right there, Filinion! Did you just switch up the order!?”

“You damn cow. Don’t act victorious just because the journey is so much easier up on Boo Boo’s shoulders.”

“Beatrice, don’t you ignore this either! The fate of the world is riding on this crucial issue! C’mon, wake up, Sibyl! And tell them that you’re definitely the flattest!!”

Armelina grew pale and began shaking Sibyl by the shoulders, but the Royal Elf’s head flopped limply back and forth, her eyes stared into the distance, and nothing more than the name of a certain dish left her lovely lips.

Beatrice placed a hand on Armelina’s shoulder.

The Holy Swordswoman shook her head and spoke.

“Forcing her isn’t going to help. It looks like it’s time for the winter mountain

cliché of warming ourselves with each other's skin. And lucky for us, we have some lewd flesh right over there we didn't have any use for. Go, Filinion! You're our healer, so do your job!!"

She found an excuse to tear the White Witch from Boo Boo's head and threw her at Sibyl, and it was dramatically effective. Lying in a heap with Filinion gave the Royal Elf enough warmth to come back to her senses.

"Wh-what was I just doing...? Mghh. And why are these two crude and irritating masses pressing down on my head with a size that rivals the Sage's!?"

"Hyah? Someone please comfort me, I don't care who... And did you just call my boobs crude?"

"Get away from me! Didn't I say I wasn't going to help?"

"Ear flick."

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Sibyl shot to her feet when her long elvish ear was flicked in the cold air.

Filinion grinned behind her glasses.

"Heh. When the winter cold amplifies the pain signals, a flick to the ear is pretty bad for a human, so I wonder how bad it is for the pointy ear of an Elf. But if you promise to help me, I'll geeently warm your long ears. Ahm, ahm."

"Ah, please don't gently bite me there! You two! Quit watching and get this insolent slime monster off of me!!"

"Yeah, but dealing with that cow is a pain and it's useful having found a way to discipline a certain Elf who keeps looking down on us despite being second flattest."

"Okay, I didn't mishear this time! You're definitely calling me the flattest!! ... That's it. Don't expect me to hold back any longer. If that girl with the second least interesting character – yes, and thus the second flattest in that sense – starts hallucinating again, we'll be stranded up here! We need her to guide us up the mountain!!"

Sibyl blushed and tried to shout back, but she shrieked limply from the ground and fell silent again. Filinion had apparently broken her with the

forbidden technique known as blowing in the ear.

After many sacrifices, Boo Boo's group finally arrived at the summit.

Sibyl gasped for breath in horse-and-carriage mode with two large masses on her small head and her shoulders at different heights. There was no light in her eyes as she spoke.

"Th-this was an excellent lesson on how painful it must have been for my fellow Elves who were bought as slaves and chained together. I'm starting to think the world would be better off if their entire species went extinct..."

"We've arrived ☆"

After relying on other people's help, Filinion was of course full of energy as she got down from Sibyl's back. The bright look on her face suggested she felt not even a twinge of guilt for riding that small and slender girl up the mountain.

Armelina lightly elbowed Beatrice in the side and winked.

"(Come to think of it, Beatrice, couldn't you have used your flames to heat up Sibyl who whose presence is so flat you'd barely notice her.?)"

"(Are you that bothered about this flatness thing? Well, I might have considered it if she bowed her head flat against the ground and flattered us a fair bit. I would have flat out refused otherwise.)"

"Would you stop saying 'flat' so much!?"

"Oh, you wanna fight!?"

While those two's private conversation grew much less private, Boo Boo trudged across the thick perpetual snow of the summit. It was more like a thick layer of ice than snow. It was impossible to tell how thick it really was. Without soil, the seed would not sprout. They had been right to bring the leather backpack. Boo Boo set it down and scattered around the black sludge within. That rotten flesh was what remained of the Underworld's giant marine creature.

Then he planted the various-sized plant seeds he had also brought with him. The smaller ones were the size of golf balls and the larger ones were the size of coconuts or rugby balls.

“Squeal, will these really sprout?”

“Beatrice, could you help with your flame Magic?”

“I could, but can’t you Mix some fertilizer or something, Filinion?”

“No, I can’t. What do you think I am? If I could make potions from plants and make plants grow from potions, I’d be a perpetual motion machine.”

They were already above the clouds. When they looked up, they saw the clear blue sky and the sun which sent down its light with nothing to get in the way. But even with that sun, it was chilly enough to see their breath.

When Beatrice drew her Shining Weapon and produced a fireball, the effect was dramatic.

The entire mountain peak undulated with cracking sounds.

Nutrients were absorbed from the black rotting flesh of the Underworld and green sprouts opened up. Each of the leaves was larger than Beatrice’s hand. Like watching a video on fast-forward, the new sprouts swelled out, grew taller than the girls, grew thicker and longer, wrapped around each other, and pushed ever higher. They seemed to have grabbed onto one of the hunks of stone circling like a bird far overhead.

In the end, they all formed a tree too thick for the girls to reach around even if they held hands and formed a circle.

They could not tell how tall it was by looking up.

Boo Boo touched the trunk with his sturdy hand and pushed.

“Nn. It won’t budge. Boo, I think we can climb it.”

“You spread that rotting flesh on top of the perpetual snow, but the roots must have made their way down to the actual ground as the tree grew.”

“ ... ”

Sibyl held her thin shoulders as she shivered in the cold and she narrowed her eyes to look up at the great tree. She was the ruler of the forest, but she may have felt some instinctual caution about a plant not from the island.

Had that given her a pure desire to conquer it?

She eventually reached out and touched the thick, thick trunk and then placed her feet up on it.

She began to climb as the guide.

“Oh, Sibyl’s pretty good at that.”

“Hmph. This is nothing. Praising me for that feels like an insult to the ruler of all forest life.”

“Since she has so little fat in certain places, Miss Second Flattest may be able to just climb on up there with almost no resistance. Because she’s flat.”

While Beatrice and the others watched from below, they put their hands on their hips, exhaled white sighs, and began a discussion.

“Well, it looks like we need Boo Boo to take the lead.”

“Hmm, you’re right. This doesn’t give us much other choice.”

“I’m wearing shorts, but I still don’t think I would like it. ...Shorts can show the shape even more clearly, so it could be even more embarrassing than for you.”

Confused, Sibyl looked back down and saw the three girls were still looking up from the bottom. Since he was not part of the conversation, Boo Boo tilted his head and looked up at Sibyl in the same way Beatrice and the others were.

“Why are all of you just standing there? Are you even trying to take this seriously? I thought you understood that we need to reach Archangel Marinka.”

“Hey, how about we have Boo Boo take the lead?”

“Why? I am the guide here.”

“Because you’re spreading your legs like you’re doing the breaststroke to cling to the tree and that is one hell of a visual when you’re wearing an extremely short skirt. ...You Elf princesses sure wear some amazing royal underwear.”

Sibyl blushed, screamed, let go of the tree to hold down her skirt, and fell. Boo Boo frantically tried to catch her, but she slipped right between his giant arms.

“Hyah!”

But he did catch her after all.

By having the side of her very royal underwear catch on his right tusk.

“Wah, wah, wait, wah!!”

“Squeal?”

The Royal Elf blushed and shouted while dangling from a single point of support with her hips sticking straight up, but she was so close to Boo Boo that he apparently could not see anything. It may have been like having a bug on your face.

“What just happened?”

“I’m swaying... Please don’t tilt your head!! I-I’m being squeezed by my own underwear...”

“Hey, Sibyl, flail your arms and legs around too much and they’ll tear. Then you’ll have an even more notable trait than being second flattest.”

“Ehh? You mean she wouldn’t be wearing anything under that miniskirt dress? That takes a lot of courage even when you’re wearing a shrine maiden outfit that goes down to the ankles.”

“I don’t want that either!! Gently!! Gently crouch down to lower me to the ground!!”

“...If it turns out you started climbing as part of a seduction plan, I will never forgive you...”

They began climbing the giant tree once more but with the Iberian Orc in the lead.

Boo Boo’s reach and grip strength were fundamentally different than the girls’, so the route he chose was not always climbable for the others. The Holy Swordswoman and the others made sure they did not reach a dead end as they climbed up the bumpy surface of the tree trunk.

“Pant, pant, pant...”

“Those aren’t even proper words, but I can still tell it’s the glasses cow. But don’t expect anything from me, cow. You preserved your strength up the

mountain by clinging to Boo Boo and Sibyl, so you can handle the tree climbing yourself.”

Beatrice gave that cold comment, but then she realized something.

They were higher up than the mountain summit, but the biting cold had vanished. She initially thought she had gotten used to it or her sense of cold had numbed over, but there was no white color to the breaths leaving the lovely lips of red-faced Sibyl who was fidgeting on a nearby branch (probably because she was worried her panties had stretched). That meant it was not just a subjective thing.

There was also no issue with the air thinning.

It was like the physical sky was being replaced by an occult heaven.

“Boo. I can see it.”

Boo Boo was looking up in the lead.

The great tree’s growth had suddenly stopped. The top had bumped into and grasped tightly to a floating mass of rock with an area of about 30 square meters.

This was the bottom edge of the small floating islands known as the sky territory.

Once Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others had climbed on top of the large rock, they found an unusual scene.

The blue sky spread out around them.

Countless islands of varying sizes floated overhead.

And above those was the sun giving off its radiant light.

“Wait, wait. The path really does continue up from here. Can we make it all the way up there?”

The distribution was uneven, but it overall looked like the islands surrounded an invisible cylindrical tower. Or like an intense meteor shower had been frozen in time, providing footholds up to heaven.

“B-but isn’t there a lot of space between islands? The closest one looks more

than 20 meters away.”

Just as Filinion made that hesitant observation, a dry cracking sound rang out.

A small rock broke off at Boo Boo’s feet and then floated up in violation of gravity. It circled at the girls’ eye level and then shot straight up.

Beatrice’s eyes widened.

“Can we break pieces off of the heavy islands to send them higher using the power keeping the islands afloat?”

As soon as they had that answer, a new shadow appeared as if to block the way.

Yes, a shadow.

Much like a solar eclipse obstructing the sun overhead, a humanoid shadow definitely flew down from heaven.

She had healthy brown skin and blonde hair that reached her shoulder blades.

And she had a pair of giant white wings that resembled swan wings.

A single large cloth that looked something like a pure white tablecloth was wrapped around the important parts of her slender, undeveloped body to take the form of a dress.

And as a finishing touch, she had what was clearly a halo above her head.

The overall image led Beatrice to speak a name.

“...Archangel Marinka...?”

“No, that is technically just her shadow.” Sibyl’s response was difficult to interpret. “You cannot communicate with Marinka when viewing only one of her. Just like a solar eclipse, both Marinkas must be combined. The ideal plan here is to continue to the top and have the two Marinkas meet.”

The Archangel with girlish curves flew through the empty air in a way the surface-bound humans could not and she spoke in a quiet but far-reaching voice.

“Warning. The *hi**** reasure being prot**d* here is not curr****ly av****
**** *iewing*. Please leav ****ediately and wait until another oppor****ity.”

It was a staticky voice that sounded like having fine sand poured in your ear.

“Marinka, we have no time. We need your hidden treasure to resolve a problem on the surface. We would like to borrow it. Otherwise, the damage will not be contained to this world you love. It will mean loss of life beyond the reach of our territories.”

“I **nnot make excep***ns over perso*** ***lings.”

A great pressure bore down on Beatrice and the others like a suspended ceiling.

They looked like will-o'-the-wisps the size of tennis balls.

But they were not. They were masses of Elements: red fire, blue water, green earth, and yellow wind. At the size of a girl's fist, they did not look very powerful, but that was merely an issue of scale. They were actually a collection of thousands or tens of thousands of tiny will-o'-the-wisps compressed too tightly to maintain their lizard or maiden forms.

The four balls slowly circled in the sky one level above Beatrice's group and they each would have been as large as a warship at their proper size.

While Beatrice's group felt a biological revulsion like seeing a swarm of all-consuming locusts, the brown Archangel calmly spoke.

“If you do *** heed my warn*** and lea**, **ere is only one solu***n: forced removal.”

“Marinka!!”

Sibyl knew she could not be contacted, but she cried out all the same.

However, the response was mechanical.

“This is an invio**ble free region **** must r**ain free of all worldly impu***ies. Guardians of the hea***ly t***itory, do your j*b.”

The halo above her head clearly glowed brighter.

And a moment later, formless red, blue, green, and yellow lights mercilessly rained down as if to crush all of the limited land floating in the sky.

Part 5

Two palm-sized fairies flew at a height of about 100 meters near Boo Boo's house. They were the sisters Meridiana and Alice.

"Boo Boo..."

Meridiana, the elder sister, flapped her clear, bug-like wings while staring into the distance. The sky was their territory, but the sun was simply too far. They had tried flying up that high once, but their wings would not give them the lift needed to stay afloat after passing a certain point.

The others had considered having the Thousand Dragon, who was a complicated person for the Fairies, carry them up on her head and stretch upwards from the mountain peak, but there must have been some reason the idea was abandoned. For one thing, it was hard to imagine her standing straight up, including the tail.

Then Alice, the younger sister, twitched her little ears.

"Mh. What does that smelly hunk of fat matter!?"

"I will not forget that you're still insulting him like that, Alice. You need to be punished once we return to the surface."

Alice gave a tearful yell, but then something cut across in front of their vision.

Fairies were at the bottom of the food chain. Even a giant seabird could kill them if it caught them. That was why the sisters tensed up, but then the motion stopped. They frowned and followed it with their eyes.

It was a ring with a diameter of about 30cm. It was made of a smooth inorganic substance that was neither glass nor metal. It had no evident wings, but it was perfectly stable in the air as it slid slowly to the side. What was it? The two Fairies were still utterly confused as they flew around the mystery object to observe it. Since it had no obvious fangs, claws, or talons, their

suspicion was stronger than their fear.

“I hear something like air escaping a balloon. Is it floating by expelling air downwards?”

“Hm? But it has glass eyeballs.”

The ring indeed had two round pieces of clear glass on the sides. They were about the size of the Fairies’ heads. And a closer inspection showed that it was repeatedly but irregularly turning back and forth as it moved slowly to the side.

“Is it...watching the surface from above?”

“Is it?”

The sisters exchanged a glance. That meant it served the same role as them. And what were the noncombat Fairies doing?

The Fairy sisters flew in a regular figure 8 and scattered scales from their wings to reflect the sunlight while they shouted at the top of their lungs.

“E-emergency!! If they’ve sent in a reconnaissance team, an attack is imminent!”

“The...the...the enemy is comiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!! Everyone to full alert!! The inn town humans are about to attack!!”

Meanwhile, down in the forest near Boo Boo’s house, Morgan, elder of the Fairy village, gave a quiet report while hovering near Sutriona’s shoulder.

“We have a report from above. It is about to begin.”

“I see.”

The cross-armed Fairy Queen did not even need to explain that the dormant Red Iberian Orcs were powerful. No matter how many Level Cappers were among the inn town humans, not even an all-out attack could kill the Red Iberian Orcs. It would only cause pain which would hasten their awakening.

A portion of the mountain slope was fenced off to form a simple house garden and Ileana pulled her legs out of that soft soil.

“The military textbooks change from generation to generation, but there is

one basic theory all human strategy follows. They start with a small number of scouts, then they use their long-range artillery, and finally the main unit charges in to finish off the enemy. If we simply wait for the enemy to arrive, the Reds will unavoidably take some damage.”

Perhaps because she had once been made the guardian of a secret Soviet facility, brown-skinned Ileana had knowledge one would not expect of a Mandragora.

The human Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau and Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra were looking into the distance from the top of the tall conifer trees overhead. They had turned ice or a jewel into lenses to construct makeshift telescopes for checking on the enemy force.

“They number...somewhere between 5000 and 6000, I think,” said Wildefrau.

“We’re lucky the inn town’s forces were worn down so much by the Underworld battle,” said Huldra. “That said, I see Liderc, La Voisin, and...geh, is that Tlazolteotl!? They’ve got a bunch of veterans I’d really rather not have here!!”

“Maybe the battle with the Underworld Lord acted as a screening process that only left the nastiest ones here. And who are those people?”

“One is a field officer in the JSDF and one is a high-ranking member of a South American cartel. We had always worried that the organizations back on Earth would obstruct our activities here in this world.”

In other words, these fierce warriors were regularly a part of death and violence even outside this world of swords and Magic. The Cold War ghosts they had run into during the Underworld battle were proof enough of what a difference that could make. Also, the humans heading here now were the truly skilled who had endured an invasion by elite ghosts that could resurrect their single life as many times as necessary.

That was a trophy that Wildefrau and Huldra had not won since they had died at the end of the Underworld battle and been resurrected with a one-time-use trick.

The narrow vision of their telescopes showed a brown girl wearing many

feathered decorations.

Huldra clicked her tongue and threw aside her telescope as the distant ground was covered by rapid flashing lights like at a press conference. All of those bright lights were Magic. Those fired seeds of destruction drew arcs through the air and soon dropped back down as a gapless downpour.

Twintailed Huldra shouted down below as the first wave arrived.

“Attention! Discharge now!!!!!!”

“You don’t have to yell. Perverted carrot, let’s do it like we planned.”

“Very well.”

Sutriona sighed with her hands on her hips and glanced over at Boo Boo’s house. Summon Hunter Gruagach and Noble Dancer Rusalka were there in mourning clothes and an armored leotard respectively. They were holding up Ultimate Weapon Abyss who remained unconscious with her twin strands of mottled silver hair falling in front of her body.

“W-we are ready too.”

“You can get started!!”

The Fairy Queen then tapped her small heel on the ground. And she spoke casually to *someone else*.

“You heard them. Let’s get started, weakest!!”

Then the side of the mountain rose up.

The black soil was peeled away and the trees of the forest toppled without the dirt needed to support them. In their place, a sea of sinister reptilian scales, giant sail-like wings, and a brutal dragon’s maw appeared.

It was 1000 meters long.

The Thousand Dragon moved her wings while keeping just barely enough distance to not destroy Boo Boo’s house and she rolled the curled up and unmoving Red Iberian Orcs onto her back. With those red apocalyptic eggs on her back, that incarnation of violence finally flapped her massive wings.

She floated up.

She flew.

Just as the target of attack escaped into the air, the colorful lights completed their arcing path and detonated on the side of the mountain.

Tons of dirt and dust fell from the dragon's back like a landslide and twintailed Huldra struggled not to fall off with it.

"Eek, eek. Oh, no. Boo Boo's house..."

"We got Abyss out, so that won't be a problem. The Fairies can always make him a new one. Still, I do wish we could have sent this mass of lift with the sun expedition team. But the world is a complicated place and this was the ideal place for her."

Of course, the attacking humans would not stop here.

A solid sound rang out.

There was movement on the surface.

Lots of rusted metal welled up. Battered helmets, breastplates, gauntlets, and other armor were brought together as if by magnetism. The masses of red rust erupted with the force of a volcano and rapidly grew large enough to rival the Thousand Dragon.

Was it the face of a clock, or was it a great sinister insect? Several twisted legs stood on the ground, tore into it, and began a forceful attack. It trampled both level ground and mountains in its intense pursuit of the fleeing dragon.

Curly blue-haired Wildefrau's eyes widened.

"Is that human Magic? How could you even use that in the underground Labyrinth!?"

"...Criminal Queen Tlazolteotl..." groaned Huldra in her cheerleader uniform.

The people on that bizarre rusted form's back were held there not by anger or hatred, but by bottomless fear. The extinction of the human race and the end of the world were at stake, so they felt no pangs of conscience in their actions here.

But at the same time, it was all for naught.

Not even their greatest efforts could kill the Reds. The defenders could not afford to have the time limit shortened before Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others returned with the proper solution.

(I never expected to risk my life to protect Earth and its humans.)

Sutriona was a paradox with a soul, one of the Break News who created breaking news if they were merely sighted. She could not be bound by the standards of good and evil that another species had invented. Nevertheless, she was still acting on the side of the defenders. And she was not alone. Many others were there with her.

Why was this happening?

Was it evolution? Or was it regression?

After some thought, Fairy Queen Sutriona gave a fierce bark of laughter.

“Humans! Have you finished loading Tselika?”

“Y-yes. That Demon Lord is with me. We are ready when you are.”

“You said that girl can control the wind and air, right? Then follow me. The Sandstorm of Red Madness made by my toxic blood wings is powerful, but if I used it here, I would drive the weakest here – this dragon – mad. You control it with your Magic.”

“Hmph. Don’t forget that I’m only helping because Onee-sama agreed to it!”

This was why the Noble Dancer had stayed here instead of joining Beatrice’s group.

The silver-haired black ribbon dress girl put her hands on her hips and looked down at the pursuers covering the ground.

Gigantic red butterfly wings burst from her back.

“It is time to fight back. It is time you many side characters lamented the tragedy of not taking my side. I will throw you into utter disarray!!”

Part 6

The white-winged Archangel had a small body and brown skin.

The intense Elements launched by Marinka poured down as an aerial bombing.

But there was a way out of it.

The floating islands had a special trait not shared by Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others. They remained afloat because some kind of power was in perfect equilibrium with the weight of the stone. So if the stable islands were split and the weight altered, they would head upwards.

“Kyaaahh!?”

White Witch Filinion could not be expected to join the fight, so while she screamed and held her hands over her hat to protect her head, Boo Boo drew his Shining Weapon that looked like a log or steel beam.

Then he stabbed the flat tip into the center of the 30-square-meter mass of rock like it was a steel spike.

He split it.

Hard rock shot out like a splash and then flew through the air. It was almost like flipping over the mat someone stood on. The dirt rose above their heads and collided with the downpour of Salamander Fire Spirits, the red will-o'-the-wisps approaching them like fire arrows attempting to finish off a nearly fallen castle.

Several sticky flowers of fire blossomed like several Molotov cocktails had collided.

There was no need to dodge afterwards.

Since the entire island had crumbled like a cookie, the ground below their feet

floated up on its own. Next, the blue Undine Water Spirits, which could not take their maiden forms, approached with the force of a warship's size and grazed the spot Boo Boo's group had just vacated. The top of the great tree was mercilessly sliced away by the ultra-high-pressure water.

Armeline used her Shining Weapon metal staff to summon a giant metal ball on a chain as she yelled to the others.

"This is worse than a mass of naphtha or an industrial cutter. I doubt directly touching these things will end well! Don't forget to keep a projectile or shield between you and them!!"

Because the rock below their feet had split, Boo Boo and Beatrice were forced to cling to separate rocks. Filinon looked this way and that after sinking down to a sitting position.

"H-huh? Can we just guide these elevators to the goal at the top instead of making risky jumps between islands? Y-yahoo, looks like the humans win in the eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeend!"

"Squeal. Are everyone's rocks speeding up? We'll be in trouble if we don't jump to a new one soon. If there's an island above us, we'll be squished between them."

"Beatrice!!"

Armeline gave a shout and Beatrice reluctantly launched a fire arrow straight overhead. Before the stone could become a shooting star, it exploded like a firework, so gravity took hold once more and Filinon began to fall.

While glancing over as Boo Boo caught the soft and fluffy blonde in both hands, Royal Elf Sibyl lightly jumped from her small, accelerating rock to a different island.

Brown-skinned and white-winged Archangel Marinka ignored the only floating footholds in the sky and hovered in empty space. Sibyl glared up at her former friend who repeatedly moved left and right in a gentle circle and she raised her twisted Shining Weapon that looked like both a bow and a staff.

"Marinka..."

She could not use the Magic created for humans.

The Skill of her species simply allowed her to materialize the residual thoughts residing in objects.

“If you sit in the ruler’s throne, you must carry out the ruler’s duties!!
Archangel Marinkaaa!!”

Countless people had attempted to reach heaven.

Sibyl summoned the residual thoughts of those who had fallen along the way and sent a giant rotating blade toward the brown angel.

(But the number of residual thoughts is bound to shrink as we climb. The altitude and the number people who made it that far is bound to have an inverse relationship. I can’t rely on my Skill too much!)

A group of green Gnome Earth Spirits used their weight to deflect the rotating blade that looked a lot like a helicopter’s main rotor. It smashed a nearby island in two, but no one even looked in that direction. Then the group of Gnome Earth Spirits approached like a sharp right hook from a giant in order to blow away the slender Royal Elf and the island she stood on.

“Oh, no you don’t!!”

On a different island, Armelina threw her metal ball and chain.

Instead of the green lights or Archangel Marinka, she was targeting Sibyl’s island itself. The Royal Elf stepped on top of the metal ball that landed at her feet and she grabbed onto the thick chain just before Armelina pulled the chain back. The exciting fishing maneuver whisked Sibyl away from the island just before the many Gnome Earth Spirits smashed the island to pieces and the remaining clumps of dirt shot straight up in defiance of gravity.

Armelina transformed her blunt weapon into a hammer and broke up the rock below their feet to gain some buoyancy. She then noticed a gauntleted hand holding onto the edge of that rock.

Beatrice had apparently joined them with fire wings growing from her back.

“It’s so not fair you can do that!!”

“It doesn’t let me fly around all I want like that Archangel can. I can only make

straight-line midair dashes, so if I'm not careful, I'll launch myself out into empty air."

With a loud boom, the Holy Swordswoman jumped. She used a broken-off clump of dirt as an elevator to reach the same island as Boo Boo (and Filinion).

But heading up was not enough to shake free of the brown Archangel.

The Archangel and the four-colored Elements did not need ground to stand on. While Boo Boo's group was restricted in their movement, they could move in any direction they liked. Needless to say, the sky was Marinka's territory.

"So what do we do about her? Actually, maybe this is lucky. We've met the big boss without having to climb all the way up to the sun."

"Like I said, that is no more than Archangel Marinka's shadow. To contact her, we must bring both Marinkas together."

"I'm not really sure what that means, but are you saying that isn't actually Marinka!?"

"There is no distinction. Simply put, there is a Marinka out here on the front line and there is a Marinka staying back at the sun. They need to be brought together to contact them, but you cannot say she is only a 'whole' being when together. It is more like she allows certain flaws in order to personify the entire phenomenon."

"Well, I can see you have no intention of actually explaining it. So we just have to get to the goal then!?"

Armeline breathed a heavy sigh and pressed her palm against Sibyl's wide-open (and less flat) chest. The Royal Elf toppled backwards and off of the island, but a moment later, a yellow-glowing Element shot between the two of them like sniper rifle bullet.

And it did not end at just the one shot.

Yellow dots of light surrounded the island like watching a water balloon popping in super slow motion. Then they were all rapidly fired inwards simultaneously. Armeline jumped off of the unstable platform before she was filled with holes.

She just barely slipped through the gaps in the sniping.

The flatness of a certain part of her anatomy may have saved her.

Smashing the rock would create an upwards-floating elevator, but the girls' bodies were still bound by gravity. Without anything to stand on, they would fall and then die on impact.

Sibyl had destroyed the stone with a materialized residual thought and she was floating back up from a somewhat lower position. While passing that island by, Armelina transformed her metal staff into a large rake and caught the edge to climb aboard.

Boo Boo, Beatrice, and Filinion were on a platform further up.

The brown Archangel chose them as her top priority target and looked away from Sibyl and Armelina.

"That was a mistake, Marinka," said the Royal Elf who ruled the land.

"???"

"You took your eyes off of me. Doing that for even a moment was a catastrophic mistake. Because I can materialize residual thoughts and use any projectile I like." Sibyl lightly raised her Shining Weapon that looked like both a bow and a staff. "And your territory has a few defining traits. 1: There is a force here that keeps things afloat. 2: If that force is in equilibrium with the island's weight, the island will remain in place. 3: The island descends if it is heavier and ascends if it is lighter. That still applies when the island is broken or split. 4: Once an island begins acceleration, its speed will gradually increase."

Those rules alone may have not have indicated much of a risk.

"In other words."

But that was fine.

In fact, it was for the best given Sibyl's goal.

"If I surreptitiously destroyed the bottommost island with an arrow, the small rocks would continue accelerating all the while. And by the time they reached this height, they would become quite the dangerous weapon."

It was a lot like an inverted version of scattering pachinko balls from the top of a high-rise building.

A storm of pebbles shot up all around Archangel Marinka. There were some sporadic noises reminiscent of firecrackers, so some of them may have broken the sound barrier.

“Ghhh***.”

Marinka covered her face with both hands and called the Elements over to form a shield, but could she really cleanly block every last one of them? And Sibyl and Armelina did not stay put. While the primary Elements were focused on protecting her, they had their island ascend toward heaven.

“H-hey. We’ve accelerated a fair amount too. Are we really going to stay on this one!? Hey!!”

“This is the only way to catch up to the leading group. Your Magic is quite convenient, so I’m counting on that. Make a wire or chain we can use to jump over and get ready to use it.”

They passed by more and more floating islands as they picked up speed.

It felt a lot like a vertical version of racing down the highway, but they did not have a steering wheel. If there was another island in their path, they could not dodge it and they would be crushed flat.

They saw flames not caused by the Salamander Fire Spirits flickering on one of the higher islands.

“That’s it. Beatrice is on that island.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Do it now. Judge the timing well.”

“So you’re leaving all the work with me, you naturally selfish princess!!!???”

Sibyl wrapped her slender arms around the Fighter Priest while Armelina yelled at her, threw the ball and chain, and somehow managed to hit the neighboring island. Guided by the taut chain, they flew from their island and soon passed it in height. The one they had left had collided with a different island, but they had managed to regroup with Boo Boo’s group in the lead.

“S-squeal! Are you okay, Armelina, Sibyl!?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about us. Because Sibyl somehow managed to get an attack in on Marinka...”

Boo Boo must have been relieved to see the Fighter Priest because he slumped into a sitting position. While clinging to his thick leg and squeezing her breasts between her backpack’s shoulder straps, Filinion gave an excited and tearful shout.

“Th-that was an incredible storm of rocks! It was like someone was firing a Vulcan cannon from below, but what was it? It didn’t seem like the Gnome Earth Spirits.”

“...Cough, cough. It must have been Marinka’s last resort. Now let’s stop thinking about that and work our way higher.”

The righteous police officer who would never look away from the truth tried to correct the Royal Elf, but Sibyl slipped her hand into the slit in the Fighter Priest’s clothes and silenced her with a pinch to the butt. Silencing people was a ruler’s specialty.

The island they were on was ascending too.

Marinka must have been having trouble back at the lower levels because the obstruction stopped for a moment. The acceleration accumulated by remaining on the same island helped bring them higher and higher.

That was when Beatrice finally realized something and opened her mouth.

“Hm? We’re on our way to the sun, but we aren’t going to fry in the heat, are we?”

“Gyahhh!? We aren’t going to end up a real version of mythical Icarus, are we!? The real sun uses nuclear fusion, so fire-obsessed Beatrice and her 100% Fire Resistance might be fine, but what about the rest of us!?”

Filinion grew pale and screamed, but the ascending island shot straight toward the center of the light.

“...?”

The Holy Swordswoman reflexively covered her eyes with a hand, but then

she frowned.

Once they passed the blinding wall of light, she found it was nothing more than a backlight. The sun was a giant disk that rivalled the island of Ground's Nir in size. Their island passed right by it and the reverse side of the sun came into view.

There was a garden full of countless flowers that felt like a sign of spring and several white marble columns were lined up. As the rows of pillars continued, the amount of marble grew in relation to the flowers. In the very center was something like a giant pure white altar or temple.

"Is that it...?"

It looked like heaven.

But this was not the time to stare.

At this rate, they would pass by the sun and leave it behind.

"Armeline!!"

"Really!? Am I turning into your convenient gofer!?"

They all jumped down to the reverse side of the sun in their own ways: Beatrice used her flame wings, Boo Boo used his leg strength, Filinon clung to one of those legs, Second Flattest Sibyl mostly clung to Armeline, and Flattest Armeline used her metal chain.

Once they had landed, Boo Boo heard some loud destruction overhead.

He looked up to see the island they had been riding breaking apart. That alone was hardly new, but the conditions were different this time.

It had not collided with another island.

It must have crashed into something, but that something was nowhere to be seen. It was as if the island had crashed into an invisible wall.

"Squeal. What was that...?"

"It's a lot thinner than on Earth, but maybe that was the boundary of this world's atmosphere," suggested Beatrice.

Now that they had stable footing, Filinon and Sibyl no longer had to rely on

others. They all stood on their own feet and looked around the strange sunlit flower garden. All the plants in Ground's Nir came from Ileana's All-Purpose Seed, but was the same true of these flowers growing on the reverse side of the sun so far above the highest snow-covered peak?

"Argh, I'm leaving this backpack here! If I run out of materials, I'll head back here to recharge!"

Even on the reverse side of the sun, the sky was blue and the land was filled with light like normal.

It was a perfectly normal scene of spring. However, it felt like that was a perpetual state with no nighttime and no seasonal changes, so it actually felt highly unnatural.

Looking up showed a blue sky, but no clouds or sun. It was impossible to tell the scale without any impurities to judge distances by, so it felt like a screen for filming a composite video.

Armelina spoke while returning her Shining Weapon to its original metal staff form.

"We've arrived, but what now? You were saying something about that brown girl not being the only Marinka, right?" "You will understand once you actually meet her. The Marinka who guards the sky treasure should be in the central cathedral. It can be hard to tell when it's buried in all this greenery, but if we start for the biggest building in the distance, we will arrive at a marble road that will take us the rest of the way."

While white and yellow butterflies fluttered around with no concern for the passage of time, Boo Boo and the others followed Sibyl across heaven. As before, the air did not feel thin or cold.

Nothing obstructed their path along the way.

They saw a few shapes they thought were small animals or birds, but there was nothing concerning. They actually focused on not stepping on the small creatures running around underfoot.

The scenery changed and they were enveloped by a Western castle town made of white marble. However, there was no sign of life. No matter how

beautiful it was, these were ruins.

When Sibyl viewed the lonely town, she breathed an exasperated sigh with her hands on her hips.

“I knew Marinka had grown more distant after Vivian’s death, but I didn’t realize her rejection had grown so strong. The only thing she will find here is complete loneliness. And if she is satisfied with that, I already feel sorry for her.”

They arrived at the center.

When Sibyl opened the heavy double doors, *she* was waiting in the center of the cathedral’s great hall.

The ceiling of that cathedral of eternal spring had partially collapsed, but was that coincidental or intentional? A single ray of light shined down on *her*.

A single white cloth was wrapped around a body that was slender but had bewitching curves reminiscent of dripping nectar. It was a tall beautiful woman with gorgeous blonde hair that fell to her shoulder blades and skin so white it reflected the light. However, the halo floating over her head was dulled like rusted metal and the wings on her back were the black of concentrated darkness. She seemed best described as a fallen angel.

An azure color shined at her right ear.

It was an earring bearing a jewel similar to the one in Sibyl’s circlet.

“Marinka...”

The Royal Elf whispered the same name she had called their attacker.

Just then, white feathers fluttered down from the large hole in the ceiling. The feathers fell like snow and they came from the other Archangel that had already caught up with them. The Marinka with brown skin, blonde hair, and white wings slowly descended.

When the small Archangel landed in the center, the tall and slender Archangel reached her alluring arms toward her from behind. But not to embrace her or rub her back.



She stuck her hands in the smaller Archangel's shoulder blades.

Or did the brown girl's back absorb the tall woman's hands?

The tall woman's arms entered the small girl more smoothly than liquid or jelly. There was no sign of pain on the brown girl's face and they did it so readily that the onlookers simply watched it happen without thinking. The white wings vanished from the small brown girl's back and new white wings burst from the tall angel's back, giving her two pairs of wings. Light and shadow. Now that she had seen that pair combine, Beatrice finally felt like she understood what Sibyl had been saying.

"She isn't the day or the night. And she isn't the sun or the moon. ...She's an eclipse. Does Archangel Marinka symbolize the partial sun?"

"To be more accurate, she contains all aspects of the sun, including the abnormal state of an eclipse," explained Sibyl.

Archangel Marinka. That ruler of heaven could infinitely change her appearance depending on how the two combined. But while Boo Boo and Beatrice were strangers to her, why had she rejected an old friend like Sibyl? Was that also related to how the pair of angels combined? Or in human terms, was she just in a bad mood?

"Squeal. This might sound selfish, but we want to save the elder and the others now that we brought them back to life. And everyone says we need that final treasure of yours to do it. We want to borrow that earring. Is there no way you can do that?"

The tall woman did not respond to Boo Boo's words.

The brown girl, who had two arms entering her from behind, raised her small hand straight up.

No, her index finger was extended and she was pointing past the cathedral's broken ceiling, beyond the blue sky, and at the invisible barrier at the end of heaven.

The tall and glowing woman opened her lips just a bit as she rubbed cheeks with the brown girl.

"If y** *ollect the hi*en tre****es of *** three roy** ***ilies, you will be *****
** reveal the full compos***** of this world."

Again, her voice was full of static like fine sand was pouring into their ear holes.

But the brown girl also opened her lips while her shoulder blades absorbed the two arms.

"** ou c***** ** dd** ***asur** ** the ***** **al fam*****, ** **
** able to ***** ** ***** ****ition ** ***** **."

Their words overlapped and created a single smooth, harmonious sound.

Just like an eclipse, the combination created its own meaning.

"If you collect the hidden treasures of the three royal families, you will be able to reveal the full composition of this world."

They did not have time to grimace at that mystery.

Once the words began, they did not stop.

"I will not allow it. You must not be allowed to see what lies beyond that blue."

The small brown girl and the slender white woman's words combined to create a completed hostility.

"That blue...?"

Even though they stood before an enemy, Filinion looked up in the direction the brown girl pointed.

The only things there were the unnatural blue sky and the incredibly thin atmospheric barrier.

The Iberian Orc shook his head and spoke.

"We aren't interested in the sky. We only want to learn about the Red afflicting the elder and the others. So you don't have to worry. Once we're done, we'll give back the sky treasure."

"The risk remains the same. If you gather the three royal treasures there is a chance you will discover its identity and that is bad enough. Thus, I will reject

your choice to *gather* all of the treasures *no matter what* your reasons are.”

“...Marinka, is this really worth abandoning an old friend like me over?” Sibyl spoke quietly as if slowly approaching her. “I know Vivian’s death was a great shock to our souls. We have such long lives we might as well be immortal, but we were faced with the simple truth that we can be suddenly killed. But what is with you now? Are you holed up in heaven and pushing everyone away because the surface is filled with unreasonable death? You think you alone can remain happy if you shut your ears to the cries for help? To hell with that, Marinka! If that is all you learned from Vivian’s death, then your current state makes a mockery of her life!!”

The Royal Elf was blatantly provoking her, but the Archangel slowly shook her head.

Whoever they had originally belonged to, the tall woman standing behind the brown girl bewitchingly moved and spread the four monotone wings on her back.

“*Vivian was interested in the end of the world beyond the sea. That is why she encountered the Underworld Lord and met such a tragic fate.*”

“Marinka...”

“*You rule the land which is only a limited space these days and does not connect to the beyond, so you cannot understand this fear. I do border the beyond. The beyond radiates a deadly curiosity. You know the knowledge will destroy your very existence, but you cannot resist the temptation to take a peek. That is why I must reject all that leads to the beyond. The Underworld and its direct methods of killing are a separate matter. The true issue lies elsewhere. The truth I learned from Vivian is the simple fact that we must never come into contact with the beyond.*”

The “beyond” of the sky that the two Marinkas mentioned had to be something different than just the horizon.

It was the invisible wall that existed above them here.

It was the border of the atmosphere.

“*You must not look beyond that. Even the slightest possibility of you doing so*

must be fully eliminated. Sibyl, if you had not asked for the three royal treasures, we could have remained friends. But from the moment you considered that method, you have become my enemy."

It was a decisive rejection.

"Hm? Hmm??? Is there really something worth protecting beyond the atmosphere? Isn't it just the starry sky of outer space?"

But the girl who wore glasses yet was dumb had to comment.

This world was different from Earth in just about every way. Even the shape of the sun was strange, but had she not realized the concepts of the atmosphere and outer space may have been entirely replaced with something else?

However, there were times when stupid questions would get things moving.

Archangel Marinka responded to Filinion with a slow shake of the head.

And she gave the prediction she most feared.

"There is *nothing*."

"...What?"

Beatrice frowned and the tall woman opened her lips once more.

"That *blue sky is empty*. Most likely, there is *nothing* beyond it. But making predictions is not a problem. My biggest fear is for that nothingness to be observed as fact and for the definition to become fixed. No, I cannot allow it. Most likely, if the *nothingness* of the beyond is observed, this world will be unable to bear the contradiction and it will shatter. Will the flow of time stop, will all memories be erased, forcing everything to restart, or will we literally fall into the void? I do not know what will happen, but I cannot allow any of it to happen. I do not know what kind of ruin you face, but I will do whatever I can to prevent the ruin I see coming. No one can be allowed to enter that place that was never created in the first place."

"Squeal, what does that mean?"

"This may be easier to imagine for the humans visiting from another world than for a soul born in Ground's Nir in the first place. It may have been them

that created this world."

Boo Boo and Sibyl only grew more confused.

"The humans who visited from another world, learned how to use Magic through a unique method. Many other control methods had to have existed, but they chose this one because it was the closest match."

The brown girl spoke mercilessly with the beautiful woman's arms absorbed into her shoulder blades.

"That familiarity may signify a connection."

"You mean...?"

A thought had occurred to Beatrice, but she could not say any more.

Of course she could not when she thought of Boo Boo who she had met in Ground's Nir.

So it was White Witch Filinion who said it first.

"You mean Ground's Nir itself might be a game someone created? So we can't touch the 'beyond' on the other side of the wall because no one ever created what was there? If we go there, it could cause a crash and everything in this world could be destroyed?"

However, four-winged Marinka shook her head once again

"No."

And she spoke her truth.

"Your Earth is the game. Earth was created based on this world, so it does not know what lies in the beyond. If you were to view it, it could cause a fatal feedback error, which would cause the Earth itself to crash."

Part 7

A quiet clicking sound continued on and on.

It echoed in the darkness somewhere in the world.

The true core of a certain country filled a vast space that was cooled like a cold storage warehouse.

The giant box was simply known as The Simulator.

Part 8

Sign In.

Sign Out.

The terminology centered on those words could only refer to one thing. The terminology of Video Games were widely known even if it clearly referred to a false creation, and that was supposedly why they had been chosen to systemize and manage the extremely vague concept of magic where anything was possible. The terminology had simply fit the bill, so there was no actual Video Game magic.

But what if that was not actually true?

What if that had seemed like the easiest method because they were residents of just such a world?

Yes.

For the residents of Ground's Nir, such as Boo Boo or Sibyl, the concept of Video Game magic did not mean much.

And they had already experienced a created Earth. They had received Abyss's help to get an advance look at the destruction of the Earth.

If that ultimate weapon could do it, could they really deny the possibility of someone or something else doing it?

Which was more difficult: moving a living human from Earth to this other world, or giving physical form to a collection of data?

The Game Server was here.

The alternate world of Earth had never existed.

The relics of the older age of humans seen in ultimate weapon Abyss and the underworld lord proved this world had extremely high-level processing devices.

In fact, that technology might surpass that of the Earth they had believed existed.

“That...can’t be...”

Red-armored holy swordswoman Beatrice forced out a groan.

Her appearance was unrealistic, ignored all tradition and logical structure, and focused only on symbolism and design. It looked like she had intentionally put together an outfit that would let her forget all about reality.

There was a part of herself that felt most at home like this.

More so than in the clothing popular on the Earth she had always believed was reality.

When she looked down, she saw her fingers trembling. She had never known that her own self could make her feel this uneasy.

“That can’t be true. What about Tokyo? What about Iroka, Misoka, and Haruka waiting there!? No, not just them. 7 billion people live on our Earth!! We came all the way to the reverse side of the sun island to protect them from the threat of the reds!”

Even as she shouted, Beatrice understood that all of her past experience provided no basis for anything. She realized that. The Three Maid Sisters had performed perfectly in the post-apocalyptic Earth that Abyss had constructed. If everything she had seen and heard before was no different, she would have no material evidence to deny it.

“As *I said, your Game is based on the real physical laws of this world. I believe the Gravity Calculations, Fluid Calculations, and other laws were included as Formulas and reproduced like that. Although the Scripts are not perfect, so there are slight discrepancies between gravity and atmospheric composition between the two worlds.*”

The brown girl sighed with the tall woman’s arms inside her back.

There was a sorrowful look in her eyes.

“It would *be a problem if you* came here and encountered any *unknown laws such as those in the beyond. Your world is mistaken, but it is built with a space*

where the *missing* parts are. *If you* forcibly fill in those *gaps and complete it in its mistaken state*, it will be embedded with Parameters that are impossible for a *completed world*. Whether the values are correct or not, the *entire Game Server* could come to a stop. I *cannot predict* what kind of damage this would cause. The people inside the Earth on *the Server* and *all of you* walking around Grand's Nir while temporarily given physical form ultimately *have your existences* rooted to the Game Server. If a Fatal Error occurs *and the system is rendered Unrecoverable*, the 7 billion lives you mentioned could *all be lost*."

" ... "

" ... "

Filinion and Armelina exchanged a glance.

None of it felt real. But that did not mean it was not true. The simulation they had run with Abyss meant a lot here. They had not been able to wake up even when they knew it all to be a dream. Faced with that level of Reality, how were they supposed to fight it now?

If they had been told that *everything but themselves* was false, they might have argued against it with all their might. They would have felt like everyone they cared for was being denied.

But if it was *everything including themselves* that was false, accepting it did not necessarily mean denying the people of Earth.

They were in it together.

For example, if someone was a victim of a major disaster, they would find it difficult to listen if an outsider told them to tough it out. But it would be much easier if the advice came from someone from the same area who had been through the same disaster. "I went through the same thing and I'm putting up with it, so don't you cause trouble." It sounded reasonable even if it was not always so and there were times when it was a useful statement. Breaking free of unnecessary bonds and speaking your mind could come in handy. There was no room for the usual sensibility, ethics, or self-control there.

...The other two could not help but wonder.

If it felt that real, did it even matter? Weren't the feelings and thoughts born

in that box worth protecting? This was not an unreasonable fate forced onto them by “someone else”. It was a path they chose for themselves. So even if it seemed silly to others, weren’t they free to choose however they liked?

“*I do not know what is happening on the surface right now,*” said the archangel that signified an eclipse with the intersection of light and shadow. “But the three royal *treasures would allow* you to view the *beyond*, so they *could cause even greater* destruction. Thus, I cannot *assist* you here. I will do *everything in my power* to protect the sky treasure. If my words cannot *convince you to leave*, then I must protect *you by force.*”

Their minds broke before their bodies.

They had lost the fundamental reason to fight with all their might.

Boo Boo and Sibyl may have been unaffected, but it would be difficult for just the two of them to drive away an archangel and acquire the sky treasure. The previous attack with the elements had been difficult to endure with all five of them fighting.

But despite that...

Or maybe because of that...

“Beatrice,” muttered the orc who stood nearly four meters tall. “I don’t get all this complicated stuff. I get all dizzy trying to think about all that beepy stuff using Abyss. But I just can’t understand this. You really are here, so *how could you be anything else?*”

“...”

This was nothing as mawkish as saying he did not care if she was real or fake as long as he had her warmth here.

He desperately worked his mind as he spoke.

“Marinka is looking at the Beatrice who is right here, but she has not seen the Beatrice who is not here. I don’t know what all this worrying is about, but we can’t leave it at this. She said adding something extra to an already completed world could cause it to fall apart. This might be the same thing. Even if the Beatrice who is here can’t argue against it, the same might not be true of the

Beatrice who is not here. A single statement might overturn Marinka's perfect argument."

Beatrice's shoulders jumped slightly.

Yes.

That was right.

If everything born on Earth was virtual, anything Earth-born Beatrice said was no more than a detailed fake. She would never get anywhere arguing based on that starting point. She would be unable to rebut and defeat Marinka's argument.

"I refuse to believe it," he said through clenched teeth.

And he plainly shouted it.

"I refuse to believe the Beatrice who saved me when I was all alone isn't real!!"

But was it possible to prove the existence of the Earth without using Beatrice or the other Humans? The Ground's Nir nonhumans like Boo Boo and Sibyl had never visited Earth. They could not be expected to prove something they had never seen.

But was that really true?

That assumption might be wrong. Beatrice may have given up on them before trying to rely on them.

How far had they traveled together before arriving here?

Who had they met, who had they confronted, what conclusions had they found, and how had it all led to here?

Did the Beatrice that Marinka did not know contain some hint for a counterattack?

Someone here was worried for them.

Someone here was willing to question this for them.

So she had to think through it again.

Was the archangel's argument really accurate?

Was there really no way of solving the problem she had presented?

"Marinka..."

The holy swordswoman slowly raised her head.

She was one of the level cappers who had passed level 99.

Thinking about it now, that title felt so very flimsy for something that had supported her for so long, so she spoke up to challenge it all once more.

"...What you're saying can't be true!!"

Part 9

The Thousand Dragon fled through the sky and the collection of red rust pursued from the ground.

In this case, leaving the island and heading out to sea would successfully shake the inn town humans.

But the black dragon did not do that.

Once she arrived at the coast, she made a rapid turn and flapped her wings in search of a different route of escape that remained above the island.

Tossed about by the intense inertia, Rusalka dove head-first into the chest of Gruagach's mourning clothes and gave a shout.

"Wh-what are you doing, you worthless dragon!? The ocean was right there!!"

Gruagach gently removed the other girl's face from her chest, drew an arrow from the quiver at her waist, and nocked it to her stabilizer-equipped bow. Then she fired it into the empty air.

With the sound of a high-voltage current, something like a bluish-white wall appeared. The Thousand Dragon had made the rapid turn to avoid that.

"...A barrier?"

"That is the special attack of Delaying Knight La Voisin! That stupid JSDF officer sets up walls along required paths in the Labyrinth so she can hog the Gimmick hunting grounds to herself!! Honestly, what is she doing out here instead of helping the inn town recover!?"

If Huldra was right, then their escape to the sea had been cut off. Worse, they were still being pursued by the collection of red rust presumably made by Tlazolteotl and that looked like a clock face or a giant sinister bug, yet they never knew when a barrier would appear right in front of them.

Sutriona gave a snort of laughter.

“Then we just have to eliminate those obstacles. It’s time I joined the fight. Girl, you handle the control!!”

“Will do!!” shouted Rusalka while still clinging to Gruagach and pressing her face to her chest.

The wind roared as it was whipped up. The red powder lost its butterfly wing shape and was stripped away from the Fairy Queen’s back. It became multi-segmented protrusions similar to spider legs and began a bombing attack of the surface targets from multiple angles.

A hit was guaranteed to drive the target mad, but most of them ruptured in midair. They were likely colliding with the countless barriers opened like an umbrella by the woman named La Voisin. The toxic wings themselves had the destructive power of a Break News, but they were only being controlled by a human like Rusalka.

Then Gruagach raised her stabilizer-equipped bow once more. Several magic circles appeared in front of her right eye.

This arrow was wrapped in a bright white light.

The Summon Hunter wearing mourning clothes moved her bewitching lips to whisper behind her veil.

“Tselika, take care of this.”

The single attack broke through the umbrella of barriers.

The collection of red rust on the surface even showed signs of frantically attempting to dodge.

But that evasive action failed.

With a great creaking sound, something like thick plant vines tangled around the thick legs that stuck out from it at irregular intervals. Needless to say, this was the work of Ileana who stood at the peak of plants.

Its great strength was snapping the vines, but it had still been stopped for a few seconds.

The aerial bombing arrived in that time.

It was more an explosion than a shattering or breaking. Once the white light penetrated the barrier set up between the sky and the surface, the Noble Dancer's wind guided the red toxin through that large hole.

Huldra looked down at the destruction with a stiff smile.

"Ugh. Status Effects really are the worst. Although I have no idea if that qualifies as an upper or a downer."

"They seem to be struggling more and more violently. Assuming it isn't an insta-kill effect, we should probably keep our distance. Can you break open a path out to sea using that attack?"

"The holes made by Tselika are human-sized, so they would not be large enough for the Thousand Dragon to fly through..."

They could do definite damage, but they could not bring them down instantly.

They had to respond to those desperate foes.

An ominous sound reached them from the surface. That collection of red rust, which resembled a clock face or a giant sinister bug, kicked at the ground with its many twisted legs and began to move differently. What appeared to be giant mouths appeared all over it. With bursting sounds, heavy ship's anchors were launched from there.

The thick chains extended like long, long tongues as the flying anchors passed right by the Thousand Dragon who twisted around in midair. No, they had forced her to take evasive action to limit her freedom of movement so that the anchors could pierce her side.

With a great roar, the Thousand Dragon raged about with movements far more irregular than before.

"A-a winch shot!?"

"Impossible. How could those be strong enough to tie down something as large as the Thousand Dragon?"

Just as Gruagach and Huldra paled and said that, the taut chains suddenly loosened.

At first, they thought the chains had snapped from the immense force, but that was not it.

Something had been launched from the surface.

The other end of the chains had been attached to objects shaped like boxy containers of rust. And they flew toward the Thousand Dragon with many people inside.

“Those junkies are going to board us soon! Prepare your projectiles and shoot them down!!”

Immediately after Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau’s command, Gruagach used her bow, Rusalka used her control of the wind and air, and Wildefrau dropped ice from their extreme altitude to intercept the approaching landing containers.

However.

A new figure dropped lightly down.

It landed as softly as a feather on the Thousand Dragon’s back while she flew rapidly through the sky.

The figure had red and silver hair and wore crimson armor and a pure white miniskirt.

She looked like Beatrice but was someone else entirely.

“...The...Sage...?” muttered Huldra.

The Sage drew her Shining Weapon rapier with her left hand. No, it was a boosted Shining Weapon created by stealing her fallen enemies’ Shining Weapons, patching together the broken blades, and linking them in parallel for greater processing power. If a human’s Shining Weapon was taken in this world, they could not return to Earth. That strengthened blade of death and slaughter had that definite fate built into its design.

“I can’t bear to watch this. You call this the final line of defense for the elder and the others?”

With the roar of oxygen being consumed and flames erupting out, countless sparks flew.

No, they were each a piece of Magic. The sparks moved, became straight-line blades of light, intersected with each other, and created a net-like surface of destruction. And it followed the movements of the patchwork rapier in the Sage's hand.

"If you claim to protect them with your lives, you need to take it at least this far."

It was a fan of death.

The horizontal strike swept through the air with the surface of a net rather than the line of a slash.

The roaring blades of light extended endlessly. The one attack destroyed all of the thick containers and chains. And it did more than just bisect them. It diced them. The wholly merciless destruction was like passing thin wires through the base and sending heat through them to slice through the softened vegetables when the whole device was pressed down on them.

This was the Sage.

She had mastered human Magic, making her a different sort of peak from the Break News.

But the Fairy Queen noticed something and raised her voice.

"No! Don't let your guard down!!"

A dull sound came from the Thousand Dragon's back.

Something had flown in and finally landed in the same place as them.

Even though the Sage's brutal attack had just swept everything away. The sexy woman wore a baggy jacket, hot pants, and an eyepatch over one eye. She held a Shining Weapon that looked like a thick machete and there were not a scratch on her.

"Hello, everyone. I've stopped by to play."

"...Corpse Thief Liderc."

Just as Huldra groaned that name, two other girls landed behind her.

One was an exotic girl with brown skin and countless feather decorations. The

other had an expression colder than a sculpture and wore thick black metal armor.

These monsters had taken no apparent damage from the Sage's attack. But even in the face of that, silver-haired Sutriona only cracked her neck and stepped forward to challenge them.

"That's fine with me. If you want to see hell bad enough to walk into the land of death, this paradox with a soul will just have to grant your wish."

The eyepatch woman giggled.

She did not care that her opponent was a Break News. The wholly insolent Corpse Thief even spoke back to her.

"You sound like a fool. No matter what kind of strongest you are, there's no way you can defeat my power."

And.

The direct clash finally began on the giant dragon's back.

Part 10

Prove that Earth really does exist.

Prove that Beatrice and the others born there really do exist and have lives and souls of their own.

“It is not *possible*.”

Marinka, the archangel with a total of four wings when the woman and girl combined to signify an eclipse, began with a composed expression.

“We have never seen Earth. And the testimonies of you Humans are products of false beings, so they cannot be trusted. Thus, there is not a single testimony from a being known to exist. Therefore, Earth’s existence and the existence of you who were born there cannot be proven.”

“I’m not asking you to accept the testimony of those of us you have doubts about.”

Doing that would likely lead nowhere.

So Beatrice thought up a different approach.

“But you can’t deny the things that have happened here...in Ground’s Nir. So if Boo Boo or Sibyl said something, you would have to believe their testimony. You can guarantee me that, can’t you?”

“But unfortunately, none of them has ever gone to Earth. Thus their insistence that Earth exists is not worth believ-...”

“I have a question about that game you claim Earth is,” cut in Beatrice. “We wanted to stop the rampaging red Iberian orcs from running amok on Earth. That is why we are struggling. ...But why would they head to Earth? They have gone mad, so I seriously doubt they are calm enough to enjoy a Video Game.”

A lot about the reds was still a mystery, but they could predict that no verbal

persuasion would get through to the elder and the others in their current state. They were being driven by the extremely primitive desires of hunger, lust, fighting instincts, and desire for destruction. The reds they had seen via Abyss would never hook up all the cables, complete the various preparations, enter their ID and password, and sit still until the Sign In process was complete. They would never have it in them to play a rational game that existed outside of their instincts.

“The reds wanted a hunting ground. Ground’s Nir is only a small island, so they wanted the vast Earth where 7 billion Humans live and where 6 continents of land are available if you include Antarctica.”

Marinka did not trust Beatrice’s memories or witness accounts.

But she could not ignore the actions of the Iberian orcs who were from Ground’s Nir.

“So they understand that the planet beyond the gates contains something that will fulfill their real desires.”

“...That is not *enough*. The Earth created by the Game Server may be *detailed enough* to fool their senses. The destination may simply have enough Reality to *satisfy their* hunger and fighting instincts.”

To be honest, she had expected this response. If she brought up Tselika or Skull Wave who had also crossed between worlds, those examples would also be rejected by saying the virtual reality was too realistic to distinguish from reality. If anything Beatrice could say would only receive “What if the virtual reality is even better than that?, *then any argument would be crushed*.”

But knowing that sped things up.

She only had to place that statement on the chopping block and incorporate it into her strategy.

“Then what about the underworld lord?”

Beatrice played her next card.

She spoke to the small Marinka who looked quizzical.

“You might not know, but we were killed in the underworld battle and then

the sage resurrected us using the next generation embryo. And the next generation embryo's power is real. We know that because the exact same method resurrected the Iberian orcs born in Ground's Nir."

"...I see. Because you were resurrected using the underworld's *resurrection device*, you claim that you must *have* a real *soul*, is that it?"

Earth could use its chemistry knowledge to accomplish just about anything, but proving the existence of the soul may have been difficult for them. But things were different in Ground's Nir.

The tall and slender woman pressed her chin toward the top of the small brown girl's head and seemingly kissed the halo there. Marinka giggled with both faces.

"But the resurrection device was operated by the sage who is a Human, and thus a false being. It would be *difficult to say that proves much of anything.*"

Oh, no, thought Beatrice as she clenched her teeth.

Marinka's statement seemed to be rejecting her argument, but it was actually not. The underworld's next generation embryo would function the same no matter who hit the switch. But if she snapped back, the argument would never get anywhere. She needed to make her verbal attack from a different direction.

She needed to leave Marinka at a loss for words.

She needed a decisive trump card that left no room for quibbling.

"Then I have something to say..."

It was the royal elf who spoke up from the side.

Sibyl crossed her arms with her bow or staff-like shining weapon held at her elbow.

"My skill can materialize residual thoughts. To put it another way, I cannot acquire weapons from inorganic objects and collections of data where no one's will can be found. I worked with the sage to prepare quite a bit of firepower in order to defeat Abyss, the ultimate weapon at the bottom of the labyrinth. If I could have extracted residual thoughts from inorganic Abyss herself, I would have based my plan on that."

“You *mean*...?”

“And during the underworld battle, I used Beatrice’s back tooth to materialize her residual thoughts. The sage repaired this broken shining weapon and lent it to me, but that has no bearing on my skill which is based on my species. And we are not talking about a chair or table that Beatrice held, so you cannot argue that someone else’s residual thoughts had gotten on it. I used her tooth.”

Sibyl had proven the existence of Beatrice’s mind.

And unlike the sage, she was a Ground’s Nir nonhuman. The archangel could not just reject that testimony.

It was not just the words of their allies that mattered.

Sibyl, the sage, and the red Iberian orcs. The words and actions of former and current enemies proved that the truth was the truth. Marinka might be able to deny the approximately a decade and a half that Beatrice had spent living on Earth, but she could not deny the much shorter time she had spent in Ground’s Nir. Even if there were scars of conflict and even if there had been clashes of hostility and malice, those things acted as proof that Beatrice and the others really had been there.

“You...”

Marinka spread her four wings in a threatening manner while seemingly forcing out her words.

“You *might* be lying.”

“Why would I lie for people who aren’t even my friends?”

“The *very fact that you came here with these Humans is proof enough that you are supporting them*. I did *not see the moment that you materialized the residual* thoughts from Beatrice’s tooth. Thus, your *testimony* cannot be trusted. *The Earth must not exist and the Humans are not really alive and have no soul.*”

“Then.”

Sibyl giggled and uncrossed her arms.

She seemed to have been waiting for this moment.

She tapped her slender shoulder with her shining weapon that looked like both a bow and a staff and she made a suggestion.

“If I can summon Beatrice’s residual thoughts right here, you will be unable to deny it. That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“No, *...!?”

“** , I...!?”

A staticky voice suddenly burst out.

Confusion must have spread between the two who signified the eclipse.

The archangel then spoke in a harmonic voice once more.

“No, *but...*”

“You lost from the moment you could not deny even a portion of what I have said, Marinka. You seem to know how forced your argument is. It sounded like you were trying to drown me out by shouting instead of arguing back with logic, but all you did was step up onto the ladder I had set up. I only have to wait until you have reached the roof and then I can pull the ladder down behind you.”

The archangel tried to say something, but no words came out.

There was no more need to hold back.

“If I exist, then so does the Earth I was born on.”

The red-armored holy swordswoman – no, Holy Swordswoman – only had to announce it once more.

“If you want to deny it, then just try it, Archangel Marinka!! I’ll offer up a tooth or bone if that’s what’s needed to prove what I must protect!!”

Two steps. Three steps.

Archangel Marinka had closed herself up in such a thick cell, but now she stepped backwards. No, the four-winged slender white woman slumped down to a sitting position with her arms still inside the brown girl’s shoulder blades. Her beliefs had been broken. She had lost her reason to fight. That was apparent from the look on her face.

And something was bothering Beatrice.

“Sibyl, can you materialize some residual thoughts?”

“I can, but you don’t need to pull out a tooth. I think Marinka has already been defeated.”

“Not what I meant, flat girl.” The red-armored Holy Swordswoman shook her head. “Earth really does exist. It isn’t just something inside a video game server. ...But Marinka has been alone up here on the reverse side of the sun island this entire time, so where did she get that information? It seemed like that false information led her to stop anyone from gathering the three royal treasures.”

“Are you suggesting someone intentionally gave her the false information to prevent the completion of those three treasures so our research of the Redness would fail?”

If so, then Archangel Marinka was not a villain.

She had been given false information, so she had been trying to do what was right based on a faulty premise.

“But even if that’s true, it wouldn’t have been the Iberian Orcs. They wouldn’t know anything about online games. More importantly, I can’t imagine why they would want to ensure their Red rampage would continue. And if it was someone like the Sage or Vampire Kallikantzaros who had a deep connection to the Iberian Orc village, they would have been trying to help remove the Redness. They would not try to promote the Red rampage. They would not *take the Redness’s side*.”

“Then who was it? Marinka!!”

That shout only led the small brown girl to tilt her head and the slender white woman to shake her head while using the slender girl as a shield. Was she not willing to say, or did she not know?

Whoever-it-was would not have had to directly meet her.

The sun island was a large place. They might have created the materials needed to guide Marinka to that conclusion and then scattered them around.

If the answer had been given to her all at once, she would have been more suspicious.

But if she had built up the theory based on fragmentary information found in various media and multiple sources – cave paintings, ancient books, sculptures, and inscriptions – that theory would hold great power. The more effort she put into running around collecting the information, the more she would want it to be true. Just like people would settle on an answer if they found it in multiple sources when searching on the internet.

So...

“We can’t expect anything from Marinka since she’s been deceived this whole time. The magician only shows the audience her front side. She does not let them know what is going on behind the scenes. So we’ll have to cheat to fill in the gaps. Sibyl, if you use your residual thought materialization, couldn’t you reveal the identity of whoever gave Marinka this information? This place is ruins as far as the eye can see, so I doubt many people visit it.”

“I see.”

Sibyl’s power would work even if it was someone they had never seen before. If whoever-it-was was cheating, then they would have to cheat in return.

With a light tapping sound, the ephemerally beautiful Royal Elf pressed the bottom of her Shining Weapon against the cathedral floor.

A faint light appeared.

The materialization of the residual thoughts was beginning.

And *that* appeared before them all.

Part 11

Atop the 1000m Thousand Dragon's back, two forces clashed over the dormant Red Iberian Orcs.

"Sutriona, stop using your toxic wings for now! At this close range, we'll be caught by them too!!"

Summon Hunter Gruagach shouted that while preparing her stabilizer-equipped bow, but that bow was not suited for close-quarters combat. The arrows that borrowed Demon Lord Tselika's power were incredibly powerful, but it took time to nock an arrow to the bow. Fortunately, the mourning dress girl's bow had close-range blades attached to the top and bottom ends. She would not have added those unless she was aware of the trouble she would have when the enemy approached.

"Hee hee."

Criminal Queen Tlazolteotl swung her body to the side so the light arrow shot right past her. The brown girl wore feather decorations, held a Shining Weapon that resembled a stone axe, and licked her lips as she approached.

"Hee hee hee. Eh heh heh. Hee hee hee hee..."

"No you don't!!"

Noble Dancer Rusalka cut in from the side. She created a gust of wind and rode it in for a flying kick that sent her thick metal boot's heel toward the side of that feather-decorated head.

A great roar burst out, but the blow did not feel right to her.

(La Voisin's barrier? ...*No!*)

And she did not have time to think.

She felt an unpleasant sensation similar to packed sand crumbling.

Rusalka landed on the dragon's back, jumped back to put some distance between them, and noticed something off about her heel. The leotard girl tapped it against the ground, looked down at her foot, and widened her eyes in shock.

It was surrounded by red rust.

Their equipment was Magic taking that form, so that armor technically was not metal.

Nevertheless...

"Parameter Destruction of our equipment!? Crushing the Magic people have acquired is like mocking a collector's efforts...!!"

Then a horizontal storm of light rushed in.

The Sage had launched a great amount of Magic and blown Tlazolteotl away.

"This is fine."

Or she tried to.

But the feather-decorated brown girl casually stepped forward as if splitting apart the cloud of dust.

"This is perfectly fine. Hee hee. I'm not interested in justice or good deeds, but I need an innocent population if I'm going to make any money. So to keep lining my pockets, even a cartel needs to protect the good people out there."

There was no scratch on her.

Contact Tlazolteotl and the equipment reinforcing your body would deteriorate. And she also had *something* that neutralized their attacks. The more they fought her, the weaker they would become. Even the Level Cappers who had surpassed Level 99 had finite power. If they were tripped up too often, they would fall all the way to the bottom.

Elsewhere, Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra had brutal metal claws sticking out of her pink pompoms as she sent deadly attacks toward black-armored La Voisin from multiple angles. Instead of doing physical damage, her attacks had a set percentage chance of causing instant death. She also used various forms of probability support Magic to thoroughly increase the odds of success. And yet...

She was hitting.

But the attack was not getting through.

“Give up. I have your data. Did you really think a low-level NPA officer could defeat the will of the entire Ministry of Defense?”

“Tch!!”

“I will protect my nation from all foreign threats and I have learned everything necessary for that task. Thus, you all have no chance of victory now that you have become enemies of the state. None whatsoever.”

Her thick armor was probably her Shining Weapon and her hands approached while giving off a sinister glow. Huldra was immediately reminded of a judo-based suppression technique, so she kept her distance so her hair and clothing could not be grabbed. After moving back-to-back with Wildefrau, she reported on the situation and discussed what to do next.

“Nothing I do is working. And this isn’t Elemental Defense. I made a rush of attacks so she would waste her barriers and then sent my true attack through a gap, so I doubt she could have blocked it with that.”

The glowing magic circles at the Alchemist Cheerleader’s hands and the Ice Waterfall Princess’s chest felt so very hollow with zero strength.

“There must be some kind of trick,” said Wildefrau. “Tlazolteotl damages equipment with her red rust and La Voisin creates barriers. ...If it isn’t either of those, it must be Liderc.”

“Yes, we have very little data on her.”

“?”

“She is known as the Corpse Thief because she specializes in stealing Treasure from people collapsed in the Labyrinth. No one has ever seen her fight. She seems to hide down there for long periods of time, but she does not seem to have reached Level 99 yet.”

“...She isn’t a Level Capper?”

With the roar of the wind whipping up around her, La Voisin stepped toward them in her glistening black armor. Wildefrau used a giant ice hand to wield a

large sword, but the ice weapon only shattered when it hit.

If Level alone determined everything, this would have ended the second the Sage showed up. But instead, Corpse Thief Liderc, who was not even a Level Capper, remained entirely unscathed after taking a hit from the horizontal storm of light controlled by the Sage's patchwork rapier. It would be one thing if she had blocked or dodged it, but it was odd for her to be unharmed after actually being hit by the attack. Not even Break News like Sutriona or Ileana were guaranteed to avoid injury if they faced the Sage's fierce attacks head on.

The Sage narrowed her eyes while spinning around her twisted blade.

She suddenly saw through to the answer.

"...I see. So you've intentionally kept your Level low."

"..."

The Corpse Thief had seemed entirely unconcerned, but this sent a slight tremor through her eyebrows.

That red-and-silver-haired woman would not be known as the Sage if she were only strong. The Magic-related technology that allowed people to travel from Earth to Ground's Nir had all been established and spread by her.

"There is Geographic Effect Magic that gives you an advantageous handicap in the form of Parameter Adjustments to fill the gap between your Level and the Level of your opponent. The lower your Level, the greater the effect. That would be the one and only way for a rookie to defeat a Level Capper."

"So what if you know that?"

"I have mastered all Magic, so I could use that exact same technique back at you...but since we are already Level Cappers, that Magic would be meaningless for us to learn. Using it would only create a field that works against us."

"Yes, that's right. We are the weak who crawl along the bottom and that is why you strongests cannot raise a hand against us. It doesn't matter if you are a Break News or an Iberian Orc! You will be helplessly tormented to death!!"

Liderc's Shining Weapon was shaped like a thick machete and she raged as she approached the Sage.

Meanwhile, that person who resembled Beatrice breathed an exasperated sigh.

“I loathe people like you who show off their own weakness in an attempt to steal away all the rights they can get their hands on. And that’s why I can’t give up my position as strongest no matter how much I detest it. But my personal tastes are irrelevant here. I should bring an end to your boring *riddle*.”

“...?”

Liderc could produce the strongest power because she was the weakest.

She swung her thick blade down toward the Sage, but the red-armored and white-miniskirted woman’s fingertips flew in an odd direction.

“Hyah!”

A short scream rang out.

And the Sage’s fingers lightly held the small body of the palm-sized Fairy named Morgan who had been flying around the area.

With the sound of something bursting, Liderc’s thick blade was deflected to the side. The Corpse Thief ignored the throbbing pain in her wrist and a disbelieving look entered her eyes.

“Your silly ‘power to the weak’ strategy only allows you to challenge the strongest like Level Cappers and Break News when you hold the weakest position.”

“You mean...”

“So *I only have to place an even weaker species in front of you*. That is enough for the weaker individual to steal away the rights of the weak that you thought you had to yourself. A child with a cold will be nursed back to help with great care, but that can change if someone with severe heart disease shows up.”

“.....

Her face tensed.

She shook her head like a displeased child.

“...Don’t you understand what this battle means? What good is protecting

those berserk monsters!?”

“Sorry, but I will not be moved by the sympathy of the weak. Not even the tiniest bit.”

The Sage was cold.

Her strength was the kind of strength that would trample a rain-soaked kitten underfoot if it was necessary.

“I don’t really expect much from Beatrice’s trip to heaven. What happens to the Earth is none of my concern and I have no interest in the fate of humanity. I already know how it is destroyed. Even if they overcome this, those 7 billion will be destroyed eventually. So I am only focused on one thing: whether or not you will bring harm to the Iberian Orcs I love. That is all.”

It was not hatred or killer intent in her voice. That woman had been tossed about by the term “strongest”, so she would not accept as her equal someone who intentionally showed off their weakness.

There was pity in her voice.

She felt pity, but she did not step on the brakes.

“I do not like them, but they are useful for the elder and the others. I do not like you, but you are not useful for the elder and the others. Now, what do you think that distinction means?”

Liderc had finally learned an important lesson.

Weakness could be used as a weapon, but it could not be used as a shield. While the guilt in their heart kept everyone else from attacking, what would she do if someone was willing to swing down their blade with no hesitation whatsoever?

She pleaded with trembling lips as her fate dawned on her.

“Please don’t-...”

“To hell with that. It’s time you died.”

Part 12

Of course, the true culprit's face did not appear at the very beginning.

At first, there was nothing.

No, there was nothing for quite a while.

White Witch Filinion gulped and watched with the others, but she finally grew impatient and spoke in a hesitant voice.

"...U-umm. Are you sure it worked? It doesn't look like anything is happening."

"Shh. If you don't know and are thus aware of your ignorance, then shut up and watch. The residual thought materialization is working. I can definitely feel it in my grasp. And yet there is nothing here."

Even if you lowered a weight into the water on a string, it would not reach the bottom right away if the water was extremely deep. It would take a very long time before the long, long string reached the bottom of the ocean. This was the same. Sibyl was reading in the residual thought with a fierce intensity, but nothing was moving even as she plunged deeper and deeper into the past of the timeline.

"Squeal? Does that mean there was no one here?"

"No. Since a residual thought exists, someone had to be here to leave behind the thought. It is even deeper. Much, much, much deeper. But that also means it was a powerful enough residual thought to stick around for so very long. A common belief held by a great number of people would be one thing, but it is unusual for a single individual's emotional thoughts to remain for this long!"

This was from the distant past even from Royal Elf Sibyl's perspective. That would make it an unthinkable amount of time from a human perspective.

Sibyl now held her Shining Weapon to the floor with both hands and she

slowly closed her eyes. She brought her focus to the next level. She had grasped the residual thought that definitely existed, so she had to travel back in time to its origin point.

Finally, a quiet staticky sound was heard.

“Ah, what was that, fellow flat girl?”

Armeline asked without thinking.

There was something there. It was like a collection of rough silver sand. No, it was like a corrupted video file. A chisel-like device for carving wood or stone appeared in the air. The part where its bearer would be holding it was darker. It could not float on its own, so of course someone had to be holding it.

“...Quiet. And just because I am distracted does not mean you can get away with treating us as equal, flattest. Kh...”

They could not see the person.

The silver sand static was too strong. It was alternately gathering together and spreading apart, but the person’s appearance was never clear. The scattered distribution of static almost seemed to be obscuring the most crucial information, so they could only just barely make out a generally humanoid shape.

“Sh...”

They heard something like a voice deep within the static. Or they thought they did.

“Did I just hear something...?”

“I can’t believe this. I had to go back more than 300 years to find something. That’s even farther back than the Sage who is said to be history’s first visitor...!”

Beatrice gave up on visually confirming who it was. She shut her eyes just like Sibyl and focused on the voice. It felt like parting the underbrush on a dark mountain to search for a lost ring, but she worked to make out a quiet and twisted voice that sounded masculine.

Her efforts must have paid off.

Finally, the Holy Swordswoman heard the following series of sounds.: “...The Hero, hm? Even I...admit that...an ironic name...”

Part 13

The Hero.

That unfamiliar sound reached Beatrice and the others' ears.

Filinion toyed with the side of her glasses as she responded.

"Um...is that a Job or something? But from what category???"

"Shh! It's weak, but it's still going. Focus on the static."

The red-armored Holy Swordswoman kept her eyes closed and strained her ears, but all she heard was loud static that reminded her of rain. The voice was fading. It felt like nearly grasping something only to have it slip from her fingers and she could feel the powerful impatience rising in her chest.

Just then, a snorting sound rudely interrupted.

"Squeal, what is this? They just keep talking about all kinds of confusing stuff."

"!? Boo Boo, you can still hear it? Tell us everything you hear!!"

Beatrice widened her eyes and shouted to him.

Since human and Iberian Orc bodies were different, their senses were also different. Just as a cat could see in the dark and a dog could track someone by their scent, there may have been things only Boo Boo could pick up on.

He held a hand to his mouth and tilted his head.

"Hmm... Something about witches being unacceptable, but they're tired of upholding justice..."

"The Hero must be someone who came to Ground's Nir 300 years ago. A-and at that time, they would be talking about actual witches. Since they don't claim to be a witch themselves, maybe they were on the side that punished them with the sword?"

The White Witch, who had full social acceptance, paled a bit as she said that. Armelina frowned in response.

“But then what exactly is the Hero?” I mean, if this was 300 years ago, I doubt they had the video game system we use.”

“Boo. They say all the functional calculations are done by slide rule...but research will eventually create a board that can do all those calculations for you. They say that would mean no more need to roll dice.”

“A board game...or a TRPG?”

Before the invention of vacuum tube computers, humanity had already calculated the orbits of the planets and built giant ships to circumnavigate the globe. Complex calculations did not require semiconductors.

But even so, in the Hero’s age of pen and paper, had someone really imagined the concept of the modern computer and even considered the possibility of the video games that would lead to? It was an astonishing thought to Beatrice and the others who let their Shining Weapons handle all the calculations.

Armelina sounded partially dumbfounded.

“But what did this Hero do after arriving in Ground’s Nir? At the very least, there doesn’t seem to be any trace of their presence here.”

“They say they successfully arrived in a new world, but they lost the ability to return.”

Beatrice and the others exchanged a glance at Boo Boo’s words.

Ground’s Nir was comfortable for Boo Boo who had been born there, but for the Holy Swordswoman and the others from Earth, they could only stay for a few days. The gravity, the atmospheric composition, and other miniscule aspects of the world were just different enough to affect their body’s rhythm – primarily their internal clock – if they stayed for long. And it was not something that improved with time. Omega, the Cold War hero who provided the personality base for Skull Wave, had lost his life to it.

If they had been unable to return, had the Hero suffered the same fate?

“Squeal. They say they immediately realized there was something wrong with

this world. But there was nothing they could do.”

“So they were helpless to stop their gradual death? That sure is a tragic fate...”

“So they decided to change this world.”

“...What did you say?”

Beatrice frowned at what Boo Boo said.

And he continued.

“If Earth and this world are made differently, they only had to make this world the same as Earth. That would eliminate the margin of error and they would no longer suffer from the structure of this world. Squeal, I don’t really get what any of this means.”

“W-wait just a second.” Filinon restlessly rubbed the side of her glasses. “That sounds reasonable, but it isn’t really, right? I mean, that might work out for a human, but what would happen to the life in Ground’s Nir? Approaching Earth’s environment would only make them suffer, wouldn’t it!?”

However.

Beatrice and the others could not just laugh this off. An unpleasant silence fell. Yes, they knew some people who were suffering from a mysterious disease.

“The Iberian...Orcs?”

It was not a chromosome abnormality, a pathogen, a chemical substance, or an overabundance or deficiency of a nutrient.

And yet they were clearly afflicted by some kind of abnormality.

“Does this mean the problem could be with the world and not them? This is all because they’re suffering from the same thing that happened to Omega...???”

“W-wait, Beatrice. If the Iberian Orcs are suffering from a distortion to the entire world, then why are they the only ones affected!? Meridiana, Suttriona, and everyone else are doing just fine!”

Armelina frantically argued back, so she may have wanted some way to reject

the idea.

But Beatrice shook her head, flipping her red and silver hair behind her.

“...The Iberian Orcs have much sharper senses than normal lifeforms. We know that all too well from Abyss’s simulation. So even if the other species can’t tell, the Iberian Orcs might be able to sense it.”

“So like the mosquito alarm to keep delinquents from loitering at convenience stores at night, or like the low frequency damage caused by the rotation of wind turbines? But then why is Boo Boo fine when he’s an Iberian Orc too?”

“Boo Boo. You’ve grown a lot, but do you think you could beat the elder in a fight?”

“Squeal!? I don’t want to fight anyone. And the elder’s fist really hurts. That’s why I won’t misbehave. Not ever!”

There was a hierarchy among the Iberian Orcs. They all seemed extraordinary to humans, but since Boo Boo so feared the elder, the elder had a higher standing. Or rather, he may have been named the elder because he was the strongest of the strongest.

If so, it was possible.

It was possible the elder was suffering because he was at the top of the hierarchy and Boo Boo was fine because he was at the bottom of the hierarchy.

“B-but changing gravity and the atmosphere for the entire world would be a major task. Humans can only stay here for a few days, so do you really think they would have had enough time to complete it? I doubt the Hero could have done all that!!”

“Maybe that’s why they ultimately failed.”

“...Or it’s still underway. Just like a cathedral built over the course of centuries, the automated work has continued after the original planner’s death.”

“What, are you saying this world is crawling with invisible dwarf workers!?”

They more or less already had their answer.

What trap had the Hero set up? Why had they left multiple fragments of information around the sun island so the manager of the island would gather it all and reach the false conclusion? What had Archangel Marinka feared? She had viewed the world like a video game and assumed something bad would happen if someone crossed a line and entered a space that had not been created.

In other words, what was it the Hero had protected via Marinka?

The answer was obvious.

Beatrice looked up at the large hole in the cathedral ceiling. No, she was technically looking at the invisible something beyond the unnaturally blue sky.

“...The atmospheric...barrier?”

There were some things that did not really occur to you until you were this high up.

For example, that the blue sky was within range of an attack.

(All of this was caused by the blue sky spread out above us all evenly.)

“In that case...!!”

She drew the Shining Weapon rapier from her hip and launched eight orange lines of heat. The Magic flew straight up, collided with the clear barrier, and sent cracks through it.

Electrical sparks scattered instead of fire.

With a violent zapping noise, the heavens blurred. Color vanished from the sky as if the monitor displaying it had been lost. The dark starry sky of outer space showed through. They had no way of knowing what had happened to the sky as seen from the surface, but at this high an altitude, this was the proper view. When viewed from so high up, they should have been seeing space rather than the blue sky.

The light of the artificial sun vanished and the real one lit the world.

Boo Boo looked puzzled as he watched the world turned inside out.

“Squeal. There’s a cracking sound...”

“A fake sky?” groaned Armelina. “This sun wasn’t the real one!?”

“If you could adjust the light and EM waves pouring down on the world, you might be able to remake the atmospheric composition like photochemical smog. No, the rainclouds are made from evaporated seawater and the land’s crust expands and contracts depending on how the land is heated. Light. Control that one thing and you might be able to control both the heavens and the earth.”

Of course, it would take far longer than a few days to complete an artificial atmospheric barrier that covered the entire world. The Hero must have left behind something that could complete the automated work. They knew their efforts were in vain, but they had not given up. He or she must not have been able to betray their own expectations, but the work had silently continued long after their death.

More and more clear panels had been set in place until they had fully covered up the truth of the world.

“Kh...”

Royal Elf Sibyl gave up on maintaining the residual thought and groaned while her small head wobbled. Boo Boo supported her entire body with his large hand and she asked a question with a tremor in her voice.

“...So what happened?”

“There’s nothing we can’t know if we have all three royal treasures, right?” said Beatrice. “We’ve destroyed the cause, so can we check what’s happening on the surface?”

Sibyl wiped sweat from her brow and removed the circlet she wore there. She also pulled out the ring that had belonged to Vivian.

Marinka, who had both a woman’s and girl’s body, removed the earring on her right ear.

The circlet seemed to be the base.

When they attached the two jewels of the ring and earring to the gold circlet, a pale blue light surrounded the entire accessory. Sibyl placed it on her

forehead once more. She took a deep breath and slowly closed her eyes. It may have been something like wearing goggles.

But Sibyl did not say anything for a while after that.

She kept her eyes closed and some slight wrinkles gathered in her supposedly calm brow.

“Odd. ...I am receiving the power to view the world, but...kh. It won’t focus on the Redness...?”

“Sibyl,” cut in Archangel Marinka.

The small brown girl tapped the right side of the circlet with her index finger and the tall slender woman, who had her arms in the girl’s shoulder blades, opened her lips.

“There *is* a deviation in the *light*. The sea jewel here *is not* reacting. *Doesn’t it look clouded?*”

“...So even with all the treasures, it won’t activate properly without authorization from the three rulers?”

Elder Mermaid Vivian who ruled the ocean was no longer among the living. This meant they could not activate the three royal treasures.

Sibyl scowled and removed the circlet, but White Witch Filinion tried to force the conclusion in a positive direction.

“B-but we don’t really need the three treasures now, right? Right? The Iberian Orcs’ affliction was caused by the atmospheric barrier the Hero set up and Beatrice just destroyed that. In that case-...”

She was not able to finish speaking.

She was cut off by a muffled explosion on the surface.

Even as high in the sky as Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others were, the roar reached them loud and clear. Something horrible was happening on that island which could be walked around in three days. Even with no proof of that, a crawling impatience told them something abnormal was happening. They wanted to deny it, but they could not.

“Wh-why? Thanks to Beatrice, the atmospheric barrier affecting the elder and the others is no longer functioning, right!?”

“Or did we misread this somehow!?”

When she heard Filinion and Armelina’s reactions, Beatrice brought a hand to her slender chin and then slowly shook her head.

“...We were thinking about it correctly. And I definitely destroyed the source. But maybe the effects of that won’t manifest immediately.”

“Squeal. What does that mean, Beatrice?”

“A car won’t stop immediately...although I guess that doesn’t mean much to you, Boo Boo. Anyway, we should assume it might take some time before the problem ends. And if so...”

“Wait, Beatrice. Are you saying we need to forcibly stop the Red Iberian Orcs until they come back to their senses!? Y-you have got to be joking!!”

Between the Lines 2

All that matters is that I survive.

The fate of this island's indigenous life is of no consequence.

I want to live.

I want to live.

I want to live.

I know my efforts are wasted. I know there is no way to complete this in time. Converting into human terms, the trick I have constructed will take at least 250 years before it is functioning. In the same terms, I have less than 2 days I can remain here. Since I have not left any descendants behind, ensuring the comfort of this world would be a meaningless act.

Nevertheless...

As meaningless as it might be...

Even if you know that a single scrap of bread will not fulfill your hunger and you will still collapse, can you just throw away the bread in your hand? Even if your fate will be the same either way, can you really let go of it yourself? The answer is no. You can never do that. Even if I already have the answer and even if I know I have failed, I will still struggle. I will swallow that scrap of bread and continue on. That is what it means to be human.

I want to dream of having a chance.

I want to own my fate by trying everything available to me.

Have I really struggled?

Have I really tried every thought in my head?

Is there nothing I can do?

The moment I stop thinking and the moment I stop working is the moment I let go of my life.

Think.

Think.

As long as I do not give up, I can still see myself as “alive”...

Chapter 3: That is a Deadly Battle for the Future

Part 1

She had fallen.

The 100m dragon had been brought down.

The injured Thousand Dragon lost her balance in midair and fell straight down. The pitch black dragon knocked over tree after tree in the forest and left large claw marks in the ground.

She fell surprisingly close to where Boo Boo's house was.

She had circled all the way around the island and returned to an area of wild undergrowth. It contained several abandoned structures covered in green moss. They looked like tents made of large leaves with plants and flowers placed on top, but they must have been some kind of house to begin with.

It was gone now, but everyone recognized that place.

The Iberian Orc village had been there.

“ ... ”

The red-armored and white-miniskirted Sage tossed aside the *object* held in her gauntleted hand. It was Corpse Thief Liderc who was convulsing a little. Her chest and hips were shaking irregularly, but no one would find any sex appeal there. Her face was battered and swollen beyond recognition and the fact that she could still breathe was a testament to the wonder of life.

The unexpected crash had robbed the Sage of the chance to deliver the finishing blow.

And she honestly did not particularly care whether those people lived or died.

The position of the sun had shifted a bit, but the sky was still blue as the Sage slowly looked around with her red and silver hair swishing behind her. This village was a place of beginnings and of endings. She was the logical sort of person who had changed the course of Earth's history by introducing the new technological system known as Magic, but she still unscientifically wondered if this was destiny. Or perhaps it was that side of her that had led her to call it Magic instead of Xenophysics or Special Elemental Theory.

The beautiful woman glanced at the fallen Thousand Dragon.

The dragon had wounds here and there, but most of the blood came from her back. More than the large arrowheads shaped like ship's anchors and more than the Magic fired by the Level Cappers, it was the wounds made by the reawakened Iberian Orcs that had done the most damage.

The Sage placed her gauntleted hand on the weakly breathing dragon's scales.

She narrowed her eyes and whispered to her.

"Well done protecting the elder and the others this long. You twisted your body in the instant of impact to just barely avoid the village, didn't you? You have my praise for that."

Then she slowly turned around.

She sensed a thick bestial odor and multiple animalistic cries. The Reds had been dragged down to the level of unintelligent and mindless beasts as they too set foot in the former location of their village.

The Sage had once killed these precious people.

And she had also had them resurrected.

"Awawa! Awawawa! They've woken up!" shouted Huldra. "Does that mean we're screwed!? Have the angels of the apocalypse blown the trumpets overhead!?"

"A police officer seeing an angel while sober probably is a sign of the end

times, but we don't have time to lament our fate," said Wildefrau. "The closest Gate is less than a kilometer from here. That's the one that Beatrice usually uses, right? Let's do what we can. If we don't construct a defensive line here, the invasion of Earth really will begin."

The group on the giant dragon's back was probably trying to stop the bleeding, but the Sage was not listening as her long hair and miniskirt fluttered in a crosswind.

Someone stepped forward from the group of Reds. She knew before looking who it would be: the elder. Crossing the boundary of time and the border between life and death to face the Sage once more would be too great a burden for any of the others.

"Elder..."

"...Sage."

An extended conversation was not necessary.

First, the sexy woman drew the patchwork rapier from her hip once more. It was a customized parallel processing device made by gathering the Shining Weapons after hunting down and killing each member of the special unit that had once slaughtered the Iberian Orcs with hardly a thought. It was a symbol of the unreasonable vengeance she had taken by inviting them to act but then loathing the thoughtlessness of the people who had actually agreed, but it was also a sinister weapon that concentrated the entire village's death down to a single point.

On the other hand, the elder had no specific weapon. He placed a thick fallen tree trunk on his ankle, lightly kicked it straight up and caught it in the center with a single hand.

The Sage grimaced because it made her think of a Chinese spear like a Xian Qiang or Lang Xian. The grown branches looked crude at first glance, but they would entangle and catch an enemy's attack while making evasion more difficult for them. And the thick trunk itself was powerful enough to break down a castle's gate if a group of people wielded it.

The elder's action seemed thoughtless, but it was actually extremely logical.

The way he had lightly kicked up that primitive and brutal weapon and the way he wielded it like a bamboo sword was enough to tell just how frightening his muscular strength was as a Red.

He probably could not control it himself. The reins could snap at any moment. And he made a short statement while his muscles trembled on the verge of explosion.

This was the last shred of his mind.

He gathered all of his reason to say what he had been unable to before.

“I left you with a painful role, didn’t I? Boo, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that. I was the only one you could ask, right?”

The long time spent together had deepened their mutual understanding.

Thus, they did not need a signal.

The elder’s rational mind suddenly vanished. Just like letting go of a thick rubber band stretched to its limit, he charged forward with explosive intensity, but the Sage did not hold back either. Instead of defending or evading, she actively charged forward. Her long hair spread out, a magic circle shined on her back, and flame wings burst out. All while she held the patchwork Shining Weapon created by gathering all of the blades that had once slaughtered the Iberian Orcs.

The elder’s thick tree was instantly reduced to splinters.

No, he had swung it with all his might despite knowing it would break.

By splintering it against the Sage’s rapier, he had reduced the force of her attack and sent a downpour of sharp splinters toward her like a shotgun blast. With projectiles that small, she could not block it no matter how she held her rapier. But the Sage was the Sage. No one knew Magic better than her. It did not matter whether or not she could block the horizontal storm of destruction with her blade.

The bizarre magic circle on her back shined even brighter.

Colorful lights raged madly about.

“Hand Grena-Firestor- Detona-Volca- Melt Stee-Fricti- Chemical Smoke!!!!!!”

A storm of light scattered from her rapier. All of it was Fire Magic. Each one was sent toward the sharp splinters of the tree, accurately striking them, and bringing them down. Her red and silver hair and her white miniskirt fluttered violently in her own explosive blast.

No, she did more than intercept the attack.

She also sent a large quantity of Magic past the attacks and straight ahead. It was like firing a Gatling gun.

There was a disconcerting sound as the air was fried.

But the elder was not there.

It was a constant attack. The Sage’s flames seemed to open a hole in space itself, but he jumped to the side every time and stayed just out of danger by moving in a circle around her.

The elder did not have a weapon of his own.

He grabbed another branch-covered tree in either hand, swung his disposable weapons toward the rapid-fire Magic when it caught up, and destroyed his weapons to tear a hole in the Sage’s barrage.

He used that hole to approach.

He no longer had a weapon.

His spread hands themselves contained deadly strength. If he grabbed her with those, she would be crushed in his grip no matter how much she reinforced herself with Magic.

“!!”

She could not catch up to him by sweeping her weapon around horizontally.

Yes, the rapid-fire projectiles actually gave him more opportunities when he was this close. It was just like how approaching a swiveling fan was the best way to avoid being touched by its wind.

The Sage felt a tugging at her wind-blown miniskirt behind her. That was a kind of warning. She heard a giant beast’s footstep tearing into the black soil

behind her. The elder had been rapidly moving in a circle around her and he had finally used his fierce intensity to reduce the radius of his circle as he moved behind her.

However...

“Stone Volcano.”

The ground erupted at the Sage’s feet. Her long hair and miniskirt flapped madly in the blast. In older times, some landmines were made by digging a hole, placing explosives in it, packing in things like fist-sized stones and pieces of bricks, and filling the hole back in. When the explosives were detonated, the “bullets” would fly upwards and attack the target.

This was her last resort.

The Sage had mastered all Magic using her ability to reassign Experience Points, so it had been the Iberian Orcs who had taught her basic combat movement skills. She doubted she could catch up to him in that field.

“I can’t hope to defeat you when it comes to basic specs. I knew from the beginning you were bound to get behind me, elder!!”

The Sage spun around like a whirlwind, red and silver hair spreading out behind her, and she attempted to make a horizontal swing of her patchwork rapier, but the elder’s hand surrounded her entire slender hand. It should have been a direct hit, but he advanced on her all the same.

The instant before that crushing grip compressed a wrist as delicate as glasswork, a Magic fire arrow flew in from the side and struck the elder in the right temple.

It partially embedded itself in his head.

A small explosion erupted, but his great body only swayed to the side a bit.

His hand loosened the tiniest bit and the Sage used that moment to jump back and adjust the distance between them. She was too preoccupied to worry about her skirt.

It all took less than 10 seconds.

And it would be even less if the time spent talking was discounted.

“U-uehh...”

That groan came from Meridiana who was watching after descending to the surface. That palm-sized Fairy was flying around Sutriona who looked down on the battlefield from the black dragon’s back.

“B-both sides are unbelievable, but is there any way to join that fight and help?”

“Who do you think I am?” The silver-haired girl in a black ribbon dress put her hands on her hips and sighed. “Besides, did you think they were on even footing? ...*At this rate, that woman will lose.*”

A straining sound reached their ears.

Disconcerting sounds came from the Sage’s right forearm. This was more than just her armor splitting.

At some point, the beautiful woman’s arm had been transformed into something like a leather belt.

The alluring curves were nowhere to be found. Flesh and bone had been crushed leaving only the flat skin to flap in the wind, but the Sage did not take the time to grimace.

“I didn’t even feel you grab it.”

Without even a tremor in her elegant eyebrows and soft cheeks, the Sage glanced at her destroyed arm.

“Instead of touching it, did you push the air with your hand to crush my arm with the wind pressure alone?”

The Sage could freely choose whatever Elemental Defense she wanted. Since the elder used exclusively physical blows, she should have been able to neutralize all of his attacks by building up the physical Fighter Element to 100%. ...That simple theory was not enough because different Elements had made surprise appearances such as the Fire Element from friction and the Wind Element from wind pressure.

Even then, it could have been worse.

If he used his full muscular strength, he would likely be able to tear off a bank

vault's door like it was made of sugar syrup. Just like a shell made of depleted uranium or tungsten steel could penetrate tank armor as if melting it.

No legendary swords or holy spears were needed.

Raising his base stats with cheat-level equipment did not matter. The Iberian Orcs had brought themselves to the very limit, so their ultimate weapon was the hands they were born with.

The Sage had several 30cm-long acupuncture needles float into the air and stab into her thoroughly destroyed arm from every direction. With quiet pricking sounds, her slender arm and the icefish-like fingers regained their shape like a deflated balloon being filled with air.

Yes.

Her all-encompassing knowledge of Magic included Recovery Magic.

However, Recovery Magic built up a resistance or immunity. So the more it was used, the less it would heal. It could not be used continuously to maintain a stalemate.

That was part of the reason Sutriona had judged she would lose at this rate.

“Now, then.”

The Fairy Queen made that casual statement at just about the same time the beautiful Sage and violent elder clashed head on.

Palm-sized Meridiana spoke up in a worried voice.

“P-please wait! Surely you aren't going to join that battle! They keep causing all these incredible explosions.”

“Don't be dumb. That isn't the only enemy.”

With the flower-decorated black ribbon dress covering her undeveloped body, Sutriona sounded annoyed and gestured with her chin toward the other red-dyed Iberian Orcs.

“The Iberian Orc community is built around their boss. They're holding back now for the strongest elder, but that won't last long. I think humans refer to it as Thanatos in their psychology. They will begin to scatter and there will be no

stopping it. Someone has to hold them in place before that happens.”

This did not sound humanly possible, but Sutriona was not human.

She brushed her long silver hair off her shoulder and deep red butterfly wings spread from her exposed white back.

“Honestly, I never thought I would be in a fight I didn’t know I could win. I must thank you, you poor, brave barbarians. I haven’t felt my blood pumping like this in a long while.”

Not even Sutriona could fundamentally solve this problem. If she could, she would have done so without relying on the humans.

She could only buy time.

The one stroke of luck was that every single enemy was a Red Iberian Orc. If they found even a single weakness, it would apply to all of them. The battle hinged on whether the Break News would be worn down and killed first or if the humans could use their cleverness to find that vulnerability first.

It was a poor bet, but that was what made it so much fun.

The Fairy Queen wondered why this did not feel as ugly as when she clashed with Elkiad in the Underworld battle.

Perhaps it was because the Iberian Orcs’ extreme strength kept them from hiding the core of their beings, which was very unlike those humans who specialized in trickery.

Her small feet lightly kicked off of the 1000m dragon’s back.

Immediately the Thousand Dragon’s agonized scream reverberated out.

With an explosive roar, the black scales were pushed into her body and the Fairy Queen transformed into flowing red and black lines that charged toward the center of the orcs. As soon as she landed, a dome-shaped explosion knocked over all the forest’s trees around her. The Iberian Orcs’ thick hands grabbed the branch-covered trees from the air and surrounded Sutriona who cracked her neck and gestured them toward her with a bewitching pointer finger.

“Come! Bring it on!! I won’t be broken so easily. You want to satisfy your

primitive desire to fight, don't you!? Well, I'll take on every last one of you!!"

"Awawa, awawawawa."

Meridiana was left behind, but since she was watching from above, she saw who else was approaching.

"C'mon now. If you're trying to buy time, why wouldn't you rely on someone reusable?"

"Hmph."

Skull Wave arrived with a veritable ocean of white bones and Ileana arrived as the strongest plant. Alice flew over while watching that.

"Ah, it's you!!"

"Life is finite, so stay back if you do not want to lose yours, little lady."

That was all.

Those monsters could act as a group despite being individuals and they rushed at the Red Iberian Orcs as an army. And unlike Sutriona, they were never even thinking about fighting on an even level with their opponent. They worked to stop the Reds using their ability to create more of themselves no matter how many were destroyed.

"Hmph! Hey, skeleton, my harvest requires nutrients in the soil. If you don't want the entire island to dry up, throw me some bones. I can enrich the soil with them, so I can grow more of myself!!"

"You sure take a lot of upkeep."

"I am the greatest Mandragora. Even when I am defeated, my splattered bodily fluids act as numbing and sleeping agents, so I can slow down the Reds in a number of ways. My deaths matter. So the true cannon fodder should happily hand over those nutrients!!"

"If you weren't so good looking, I'd punch you for saying that. But you're pretty hot, so I'll do it!! But only cause you're hot! Heh heh heh. A hot woman's bodily fluids!! ...Umm, we're not talking about the gross stuff in your guts, are we?"

Then a white light began to flash irregularly from the black dragon's back.

Summon Hunter Gruagach sounded flustered.

“Eh? Wait. What is it, Tselika? ...You want me to punch him? Hyah! I thought we agreed you wouldn’t hijack my body! We have a contract, so please do what I-

kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

“Wait, my wife’s right over there!? Tell me these things sooner!!!!”

A pure white beam of light raced out and Skull Wave just barely dodged out of the way before it pierced the Sage's Stone contained in his cowboy hat. Then the all-piercing Demon Lord arrow made its appearance on the battle line.

[illegible]

“You can talk, can’t you!? My Demon Lord wife can use actual words to communicate, can’t she!? C-crap, why couldn’t she be the type to forgive me cause I’m useful!?”

It seemed no such convenient creature was to be found in that world either.

The white arrows seemed to be primarily targeting something other than the Iberian Orcs, but it still introduced an unpredictable factor to the battle line. A stray shot was still a threat. The Reds were thrown off balance, so Sutriona rushed them barehanded once more.

With the Iberian Orcs' strength, even a blunt weapon could easily knock a rifle bullet from the air, so their trees should have been enough to knock back the Fairy Queen who was made of flesh, blood, and bone.

However.

“Did you forget?”

A sticky sound rang out.

A nearly-4m body made a horizontal swing of his branch-covered tree, but he did not feel it hit. It did not contact soft flesh or even the black ribbon dress woven from Ground Spider silk.

“A tree is still a living thing. Thus, my toxins affect it.”

The tree had rotted from the roots and slipped away.

The unscathed Fairy Queen produced a sinister glow from the red butterfly wings on her back, pressed her forehead to the giant pig forehead, and smiled fiercely.

“And, Red!! I don’t know what’s made you Iberian Orcs lose your minds, but my wings will affect you as well. Let’s see which has the stronger control of your body: that Redness or my wings!!!!!”

Meanwhile, the Sage’s red and silver hair and white miniskirt fluttered around her while she fought the violent elder with her patchwork rapier. She also looked over at the Break News’ attacks.

They had known from the beginning that there was no defeating the Red Iberian Orcs even if all the inn town’s Level Cappers worked together. The Sage was the strongest of them all. Even if she did have use of every form of Magic, a human like her could not defeat an Iberian Orc.

Thus, the key to this may have been those who did not fall into the category of human.

The Sage faced the elder and thought.

(So that’s an option too. But that method is like relieving the pain of a poison by overwriting it with a different poison. It in no way guarantees their health. ...I need to give that little brat a spanking later on for using such an unsafe method.)

“Bshhh, bshhhh!!!!!”

The elder’s breathing almost sounded like a steam engine as he grabbed a large boulder in one hand and approached. That alone had passed a lethal barrier. Humans and Iberian Orcs inhaled a different amount of oxygen when they breathed. So if trapped in a rush of anaerobic exercise, the slender Sage would hit her limit first. This was an anatomic issue, so no amount of hard work could overcome it.

“Steam Bur-Snow Javel-Water Cutt-Wave Resista-Frozen Ballist-Adhesive

Boomera-Heat Fo-Squall Bulle-Curling Contain-Poison Dropper!”

An intermittent rush of Magic was released from the Sage’s patchwork rapier like a shotgun blast.

Hundreds of Water attacks were scattered around, but the elder was not even scratched.

He did it easily.

His giant dark-red body jumped side to side to accurately dodge them while he approached with boulder in hand. Seeing that, the Sage took a single step backwards.

A small sphere wobbled on top of the elder’s raised boulder.

“Water Mine.”

The baseball-sized mass of clear water did not tear through the air at several times the speed of sound, nor was it several times more solid than steel.

Instead, it could roll along the ground on its own to hide behind cover and in blind spots. Once direct firepower had pinned the enemy behind a thick wall, that deadly scorpion could sneak up to the enemy as they breathed a sigh of relief and finish them off. It was not as flashy or obvious as her many other attacks, but this *partner* had definitely supported the Sage’s successes in battle.

She knew better than anyone what the elder would do. That naturally included his tactics. If she knew he would grab the objects around him to procure weapons, she could place “bombs” on them.

An explosive boom rang out.

But it was not the sound of the Sage’s ultra-high-pressure water mine detonating.

(It was a dud?)

The elder had swung down the boulder and crushed the bomb between it and the ground. Stepping on a mine would trigger an explosion, but not if the fuse was destroyed before it detonated. His correct response was far too violent and unexpected. Having failed to slow him down, the Sage’s defensive line was breached. The elder moved straight toward her after raising the boulder in his

right hand once more.

Patchwork rapier and car-sized boulder intersected.

The roar of shattering stone burst out, but the elder still opened both hands and grabbed at her.

The wind pressure of clenching his fist had been enough to crush the Sage's arm, so a direct hit from it would crush a tank's composite armor like pudding.

There was only one choice.

Water exploded at the Sage's feet.

This was the same as the earlier mine, but she had never been targeting the elder with this one. She had set this one up to catch her in the blast. Struck by the massive wall of water released from the mass of ultra-compressed water, she was launched backwards. She managed to stop moving by slamming back-first into a far distant tree trunk.

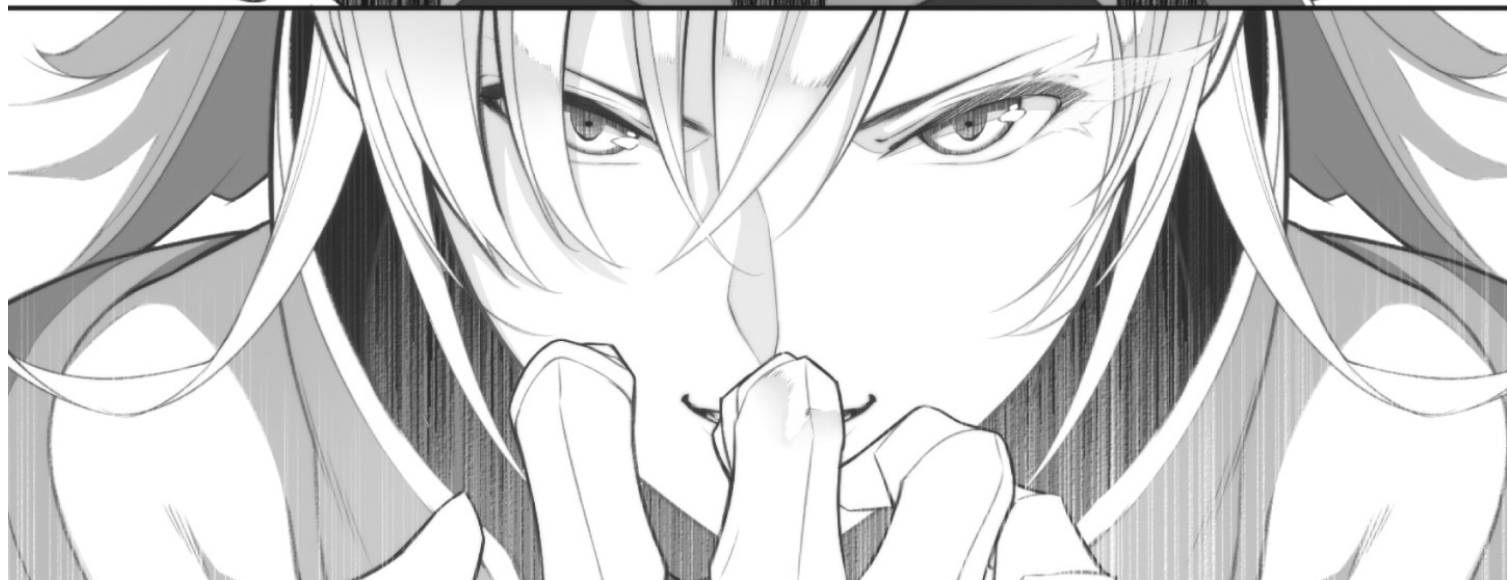
There was a roar of raging flames.

The concept was identical to a diesel engine. The elder's hand wandered through the spot the Sage had just vacated. He had only clenched his fist in the air, but the pressure was so powerful it produced great heat which ignited within his hand.

"I see..."

The soaking wet Sage lightly spun her patchwork rapier around.

"These are no more than human techniques. They seem convenient enough, but they are no more than a lid keeping our heads down. They can take us a certain distance, but they will not allow us to pass a certain point. And their convenience prevents us from letting them go. So there is no escape."



She brushed her wet hair back with one hand and breathed a light sigh.

A moment later, she did what should have been impossible for a human from Earth.

She threw it away.

She easily cast aside the Shining Weapon that controlled all of her Magic.

Not even the Sage could use Magic without her witch's wand. In the harsh environment of this alternate world, the options were limited for a naked ape who had lost her fangs, claws, and fur. The Sage had nothing now. No powerful projectiles, no Elemental Resistance to negate individual attacks, and no healing to make up for mistakes.

Nevertheless, she did not even glance over at it.

Showing no concern for the patchwork rapier she had thrown aside, the Sage with soaked red armor and white miniskirt spread her arms in long-awaited freedom and laughed fearlessly.

"...I understood the logic, but it took me so long to actually do it. That's right. We already knew humans did not stand a chance. So stubbornly clinging to that thing would accomplish nothing."

"..."

"So this must be resolved by something outside of humanity. I'm glad, elder. The Iberian Orc martial arts you left with me have become my final hope."

An explosive boom rang out.

As the elder charged straight at her, the Sage flipped to the side to dodge the dark red hand that whipped up the wind. This was more than just a palm strike. He broke the tree trunk that had been supporting her, grabbed it, rotated his entire body like a whirlwind, and made his next attack.

Given the reach of an Iberian Orc's long arms, she should have been killed instantly.

But she ducked below the horizontally-swung branch-covered tree trunk, did not stop there, and struck the elder's weapon with her gauntleted fist in something like an uppercut.

It was like striking the side of a sword.

The result was the weapon's destruction.

Once the tree had broken in two, the Sage grabbed one half. She and the elder now swung around identical weapons. No, it went beyond that. The elder kicked the small splinters floating in the air, the Sage's fanned-out hair bewildered the eyes of all who saw it, and the misaimed splinters shot right past her face to tear into the surrounding ground like an artillery hit.

It was like a lightning strike.

The sound of the flying splinters arrived only after the great explosion.

Boo Boo's Shining Weapon was abnormal. Iberian Orcs generally did not use a specific weapon because of the immense powers colliding in their battles. Not even a legendary sword or holy spear would survive to the end. So they used tree trunks, boulders, the bones of giant beasts, and rusted hunks of metal. They would grab all of the objects composing the scenery, lift them up, and transform them into a partner.

It would be broken, crushed, and shattered, but they would even use the shards and fragments.

The Sage and elder destroyed everything within arm's reach while they repeatedly clashed like two tornados tearing each other apart. The battlefield was ruled by overwhelming speed and weight. Just as water and air would become weapons when compressed to the limit, anything would become a threat in their hands. For them, the entire world was their weapon. If anyone else carelessly attempted to intervene, those murderous hands would grab them and swing them around.

It was a gathering of such primitive violence, but it was also like an elegant dance between a lady and a gentleman who were perfectly in step.

In fact, that was probably exactly how the Sage saw it.

No matter what form it took, she had hoped for a meeting like this.

She had chosen to kill the Red-afflicted Iberian Orcs like they asked, she had recruited the former soldiers of Elkiad as the necessary fighting force, and she

had loathed the ugliness of those humans who agreed so readily. Once it was all over and she stood alone in that bloody hell, her thoughts had turned to the absurd dream of perfectly resurrecting the very people she had killed.

That dream had come true.

She was able to meet them again.

Even if that was an absolute mistake, she had even made use of the Underworld and she herself had brought back their lives. Of course that would inspire an emotional response.

They were at close range. On that extreme battlefield, time seemed to have stopped and the air itself seemed to have thickened like molasses. The Sage's slender fingers grabbed the several splinters that seemed stopped in midair and the elder swung his foot back like a soccer player about to make a shot. Splinters were thrown and dirt was knocked into the air. The sharp points and solid stones collided and crushed each other like clay.

The apparent flow of time returned to normal and reality caught up with them.

Deafening destructive noise continued on and on and the Sage definitely smiled while some of her hair was caught between her alluring lips. Each attack was like an impossible divine act, as if they were firing shotguns at each other from less than a meter apart and successfully shooting down every last piece of shot the other fired. If just one of them made it through, her beautiful face would be smashed to pieces or her slender torso would be torn apart, but it was not fear that permeated her mature body. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. The elation of an extreme battle reminded her of her sparring matches with the elder in that once simple village. Those were the most important days of her life because they had set her straight after she had walked down such a twisted path.

“Hee hee.”

There was no way the color of those memories would dull.

Their brightness would never fade.

"Ah ha. Ha ha ha. Ah ha

[illegible]

The joy of those many days further increased her accuracy. Her adrenaline, norepinephrine, dopamine, and endorphins had all reached the danger zone. Would her brain cells burn out or not? She approached her enemy to the limit, experienced the same proximity to the precipice of death as in a game of chicken, and set foot in the world of the Iberian Orcs despite being human. She swung vines like whips, flicked seeds from her fingertips like bullets, and thrust out tree roots like spears. Her attachment was on the same level as a bawling lost child who had finally found her mother in the crowd. She had spent so long dealing with the silly interests of the humans on Earth and their various technological barriers. Given the life she had lived, her reaction may not have been entirely wrong.

Then the Sage noticed something about this formidable foe so close by.

She saw tears spilling from the Iberian Orc elder's eyes.

He had tensed all the muscles of his body, clenched his teeth, and desperately attempted to suppress this rampage.

The Red Iberian Orcs would destroy everything.

Both here in Ground's Nir and on Earth, they would devour everything within arm's reach, take in the strong points of every species, and continue their optimizing evolution. If they were released from here, no one could stop them. That result would be unavoidable.

But that was an issue of function.

What did they want in their hearts?

Did they want to consume others, force themselves onto others, ascend to the throne of the strongest, uproot everything as far as the eye could see, and create a barren land? If they had attacked as a group, they could have conquered all other life on that small island that could be walked around in three days, but they had remained in their village to hide from others. After

going to such lengths to avoid conflict, would the Iberian Orcs really seek the flimsy title of strongest? Would they really push others out of the way, ignore their feelings, and choose the path of personal happiness?

They had resisted.

They had endured.

The Sage stood at the peak of humanity. She had mastered all forms of Magic and Iberian Orc martial arts. The elder who led the Iberian Orcs was on the verge of truly losing his life to her, yet he still slammed on the brakes as best he could. He suppressed himself yet still surpassed her.

The light of reason twinkled in the eyes on that face of dark red madness.

Kill me, those eyes begged his old friend. This was not just a dream. It was directed at the one and only lifeform that had actually achieved that in the past.

However...

Because of that...

“I’m so happy, elder...”

There was an impassable wall there.

There had never been any hope of defeating a Red with human Magic. As for Iberian Orc martial arts, she had never once actually defeated the elder in their sparring.

That was why a cheap trick had been necessary in the past. Without help from unscrupulous people like Elkiad and without the support of those idiots who had mistaken the unique ugliness of humanity for proof of their superiority as lifeforms, the Iberian Orcs’ desperate plea could never have been answered.

Now that she was in a direct clash, the Sage had no hope of winning.

But she did not care.

With a fierce smile of anger, that beautiful woman gave a roar.

“So happy that you, the elder, are showing this weakness to me. So happy that you would rely on a human like me. But I won’t let it happen. Not again. Never again. I will never go through that regret again! I will not let go of your

hand here. This might end if I killed you like you want, but it would leave me as an empty shell in a gray world. What could I live for then!!!???"

A loud rumbling exploded out.

What would happen if she continued this unwinnable battle?

The Sage's beautiful body was sent flying in a tailspin. She knocked over several thick trees, rolled along the ground, and finally came to a stop.

No one was at fault.

The Red-afflicted Iberian Orc elder had relaxed his tension just slightly. That was enough for it to cross a line. His arm muscles swelled out explosively and an extra few percentage points was added on top of his original destructive power.

That was all that happened, but the result was devastating.

The Sage stood at the peak of Earth's humankind and she had mastered Iberian Orc martial arts, but she had just been defeated. Even if she crawled through the mud in search of her patchwork rapier, the difference in strength had already been proven. The elder's powerful arms would knock down all that stood in his way.

The Break News were suppressing the spread of the Reds, but that was not a fundamental solution. Nor had they come up with one. They had hoped the Sage would find the answer while they bought time, so her defeat weighed heavily on them.

A tremor ran through the ground.

A large step was taken toward the beautiful woman who could not even get up properly.

The Iberian Orc elder's breaths sounded like steam and his dark red muscles shook as he walked toward her. He broke off a tree at the base of the trunk and grabbed it as a weapon that would send its leaves flying from the shockwave alone and was much harder to dodge than a normal sword or spear due to the jagged branches extending from it.

The occasional flashes of reason in his eyes contained a hint of disappointment.

If this was the best the Sage could do, then no one could stop him. The elder's sorrow was palpable. He had been so very kind, so the mere thought of the gluttony and barbarism he was about to begin may have left him feeling faint.

The Sage could not get up and her legs were trembling at the base, but she smiled thinly.

She tasted blood on her trembling lips, but she still spoke gently to him.

To her friend.

To her savior.

"Hey, elder..."

"..."

"I don't mean to brag, but I'm not stupid. Well, I might not be as smart as you Iberian Orcs and your supercomputer-level brains. Still, I knew this would happen from the beginning. I knew I could never win whether I used human Magic or Iberian Orc martial arts. That is the limit of humanity. Just as we can't outswim a fish or outfly a bird, we can't overcome the limits of our species in the field of destruction."

Would he crush her head and devour her guts, or would he crush her limbs and force himself onto her?

No.

Or would the elder resist the Redness as best he could by giving his friend a painless death?

"So I had placed my hopes elsewhere from the beginning."

She did not care.

The Sage had known she would lose all along.

Nevertheless, she had gone out of her way to challenge him. Why? Because *how she lost was an important point*. Someone as smart as her would of course have considered this.

"I of course haven't placed them with another human. Nor with the Break News crawling along the ground. Now, a question for you, elder. What is the

one thing that can defeat an Iberian Orc? You must know the answer. You once left the answer with me, elder. On that day long ago, you asked me to allow the one unaffected child to escape the village. You said he contained a hope of saving the world from its crisis!”

A sharp scraping sound followed.

It was a disconcerting reverberation, like a sniper rifle bullet knocking leaves from the branches.

“It was not because I conceitedly thought I could win that I shifted to Iberian Orc martial arts. Nor did I need a miraculous recovery. It was all to provide an opportunity to learn. Elder, your minds rival supercomputers. Since he was so young at the time, he may not have learned the proper Iberian Orc martial art techniques. But by showing him a combat-level sparring session, I’ve given him a chance. Humans might be too ignorant and slow-minded to pull it off, but another Iberian Orc should soak it up like the desert sand soaks up water!!”

Was it the elder’s mind or the Red instincts that chose to dodge?

Whatever the case, that giant dark red body jumped straight back as if repelled. And then it happened.

Pebbles rained down between the Sage and the elder. Height could be used as a weapon. Each of the rocks was too small to consider a threat, but after falling from the distant heavens, they rivaled bullets. And what would happen if they were released as a dense downpour?

For the person who threw them, it would have been as casual as tossing fish food in the pond, but it could not have been a bigger deal for those they rained down on.

And as a more fundamental question, who was high enough in the sky to make use of that overwhelming terrain advantage?

“Come, Boo Boo!! All I could do was kill my saviors through deception, so I have no business taking the lead role. You are best suited as the elder and the others’ last hope!!”

It happened suddenly.

After just barely escaping to safety, the elder turned his gaze up toward the blue sky.

Immediately afterwards, a powerful wind whipped up. Something was sliding along the ground with fierce speed. While the elder's attention was directed elsewhere, a gray giant holding a Shining Weapon resembling a log or steel beam rushed right toward him. More than one person had taken the journey up to heaven. Having one person close in on the surface while another provided a diversion from the heavens had been an option.

He arrived from a complete blind spot.

But the elder did not rely on his sense of sight. Just as his giant nose twitched slightly, his right arm swung out with the thick tree in its grasp, like he was a fully-automated interception weapon.

The branch-covered tree and Shining Weapon clashed.

But then the Sage's eyes widened. The gray form had not swung his weapon with all his might. He had intentionally caught the elder's attack before twisting his wrist to rotate the Shining Weapon halfway around. As a result, he negated the force of the impact as if allowing it to slip away and the tree remained in place without shattering. The elder had intended to shatter his weapon and use the splinters for his next attack, so allowing his weapon to survive actually threw him off his tempo.

Destruction was not the only way to close in on him.

And as if to fill the blank that left, the gray giant rotated like a whirlwind and his crude Shining Weapon truly did give a roar this time. He targeted the Red-afflicted elder's face. The elder did not have time to raise the branch-covered tree to guard. Instead, he swung his own face toward the approaching blunt weapon and caught his opponent's weapon on the giant tusks that could be seen as the symbol of an Iberian Orc.

The sound was deafening.

Gray and crimson. Both Iberian Orcs were pushed back by the shock, so they both chose to fall back. A slight gap opened between them.

They looked equally matched, but they were not.

The one working to suppress a shaking that refused to go away was the Red-afflicted elder. He had resorted to desperate measures. The head was the common weak point of all life, so he had caught his opponent's attack on his tusks to avoid a clean hit there, but that had been an irregular move for him.

The gray figure slowly breathed in a large quantity of oxygen.

"Squeal..."



It was Boo Boo.

He shifted his Shining Weapon back and forth between hands. After learning Iberian Orc techniques from both the elder and the Sage, he had taken an action even those experts had failed to predict.

Mastering the Magic developed by humans was not enough to defeat the Reds.

And a human could not hope to match the Reds when mimicking the Iberian Orc martial arts.

So the Sage had concluded an Iberian Orc could only be defeated by another Iberian Orc. And thus the best option was to sacrifice her own life in order to increase the strength of Boo Boo, the only Iberian Orc who still had his senses.

His self-taught skills had lifted him high enough to be known as the Dragon Eater, but she had lifted him to an even higher stage.

“Good morning, elder. Did you sleep well?”

“...”

“If you’re still sleepy, I’ll just have to slap you in the face to wake you up. Boo, and I don’t need to hold back against another Iberian Orc. I’ll show you just how much I’ve grown!!”

Part 2

Finally.

Finally, Boo Boo directly faced the strongest Iberian Orc. He had once been no more than a powerless prey, he had been spared without even knowing the village was being destroyed, and he had been at the very bottom of the food chain. But with only one promise in his heart, that gray figure had grown to the point that he could beat down a 1000m dragon.

The desire to live.

The desire to survive.

Even if you knew it was too late.

The elder and the others had been driven mad by the Hero and that desire within him. Looking up, the sky still looked blue, but now it was the true blue sky with nothing in between. Nothing remained to mess with the elder and the others.

They had once been a small child and an elder.

They raised their weapons and softly touched them to their right tusk.

That was the old sign of a duel.

“Bmooaaahhhhhhhh

“Pshhhhhkeee

No human could imitate their roars.

From that alone, the Sage may have realized they had stepped up to a higher stage. The elder had removed the bonds of his own suppression and raised the level of combat to an area no one else could hope to reach.

He may have gotten careless.

Or he may have trusted his opponent.

...He knew another Iberian Orc would not be destroyed by something like this.

He did not need to hold back.

With each breath, they brought in an unthinkable amount of oxygen, but instead of hyperventilating, that oversupply was entirely converted into kinetic energy. A clash between two monsters like that was beginning.

Even with the support of Magic, human senses could not keep up with their movements. Two or three afterimages were burned into the watchers' retinas and the rest was erased by the veil of real and false images.

"Eek!!"

While explosive sounds continued at an irregular pace, White Witch Filinion tearfully crouched down and covered her head because of the sharp splinters and rock shards that flew her way with the force of a shotgun blast each time those two collided. A single graze could tear out a large chunk of her flesh and it went without saying what a direct hit to her face or torso would do.

There was no safe zone anymore.

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice drew her Shining Weapon rapier and sent out some fire while Fighter Priest Armelina remade her metal staff into a small boat and used it as a shield.

"So we've arrived. How are Sibyl and Marinka doing!?"

"Wait, Beatrice. Are you sure we fixed this? I thought we only had to wait until they stopped now that we destroyed the Hero's artificial atmospheric barrier!!"

Nothing had happened inside the Iberian Orcs' bodies.

It was like the moon's gravitational pull driving people mad.

It had all been caused by the artificial atmospheric barrier the Hero had created to forcibly alter the environment, but Beatrice's Magic had destroyed that. The blue sky they could see from here would become a starry sky if they were as high in the sky as the sun. Nothing was altering the heavens and the surface any longer.

They just had to endure.

Do that and it would all be over.

...However, this space was small enough to walk the perimeter in three days and they were up against the Red Iberian Orcs who had become incarnations of destruction. The threat was far greater than spending a night in an abandoned school or campground with a serial killer wandering around. If any normal human tried to play the tank role, they would be plowed through in an instant.

“Squeal.”

“Shwiiiiii....”

Just looking at their physical strength, the elder was stronger. His already fully-grown body had had its limits removed by the Redness, so that was only natural. But Boo Boo had a Shining Weapon. It resembled a log or steel beam and it was sturdy enough to remain intact even when wielded by the great strength of an Iberian Orc.

For each attack, the elder had to procure a new weapon – be it a tree trunk, a boulder, the bones of a giant beast, or a rusted hunk of metal – which gave Boo Boo a slight but definite advantage.

This was not an opportunity he had obtained on his own.

Long, long ago, the Sage had left young Boo Boo with that weapon after destroying his village. And even though it had been too large for him, he had never let it go.

“I will not lose.”

The gray approached the disturbingly pulsating red.

He approached and raised his Shining Weapon.

“This Shining Weapon has protected Beatrice’s life. I couldn’t have done it on my own, so I had help from your souls sealed in here. You saved Beatrice and I will never forget you. So I will never give up on you. I will win and save you!!”

The elder jumped backwards.

But that was not enough to escape Boo Boo. He moved further forward to

close the distance between them and gathered strength in his muscles to make a strike when he landed.

Then something strange happened.

The airborne elder came to a stop. He was caught in midair. *No, he kicked off the air.* Instead of landing on the ground, he changed directions partway through and made a flying kick from directly overhead.

“!?”

On the Earth where humans lived, there had long been stories of experts who could run on water. It was a ridiculous but never-forgotten rumor that they could use the water resistance to move their left leg forward before their right leg sank.

But the Iberian Orc elder went beyond that.

Water and air could be explained using the same fluid dynamics. And since friction and pressure existed, air had resistance as well. ...So the rest was a matter of scale. Even if human leg strength was not enough, Iberian Orc leg strength was on another level altogether. As long as it was based on a proper theory, their extraordinary bodies could take that theoretical concept and produce a real phenomenon.

It was a meteoric attack.

The flying kick had the red-dyed elder's full weight behind it.

To reiterate, Iberian Orcs trusted their own arms and legs more than a disposable weapon. Boo Boo raised his Shining Weapon overhead, but the elder's massive leg attacked from above that. The meteor was falling. Boo Boo's own Shining Weapon smashed down onto his head and the extreme force of the attack sent his giant form flying backwards. If he had crashed into a normal human, they might have ended up in the hospital, but Beatrice was one of the Level Cappers. She reinforced her slender body with Magic so she could stop and support Boo Boo's rolling body.

For an Iberian Orc, combat was like swimming through viscous air.

Humans were trapped by the swift concepts of running and leaping, so they

could not keep up on a fundamental level.

Fairy Queen Sutriona had been fighting elsewhere, but she fluttered down nearby.

The Break News had been buying time on the land, so they had placed their hopes in either the Sage who had mastered Magic or Beatrice who had gone to collect the three treasures. Since the Sage had been defeated and Boo Boo was already being overpowered by the elder, she may have been worried.

“Hey, since you’re back from heaven, did you find something?”

“The fundamental problem has been solved, but this runaway train isn’t going to stop right away.”

After saying that, Beatrice realized a Ground’s Nir resident would not know what a train was. The palm-sized Fairies had built a roller coaster for Boo Boo Land, so they did have the technology to lay out rails, but that was irrelevant here.

“And we aren’t just being overpowered. Thanks for all your hard work. Now we can suppress the Reds.

“?”

Sutriona gave a confused frown and Beatrice continued.

She used her Magic-controlling Shining Weapon rapier to point in the general direction of the distant Red Iberian Orcs and a baseball-sized fireball flashed at the pointless tip.

“Sibyl! Marinka!! We’re in position!! Use my targeting support to begin immediately!!”

Something other than the sun flashed in the sky.

And the result was immediate.

Part 3

A beam of light combining blue, sapphire, and azure dropped straight down from heaven.

Part 4

The stars decorated the great, great heights of the heavens. On the reverse side of the extinguished sun, Royal Elf Sibyl and Archangel Marinka focused their minds.

The key was the hidden treasures protected by the three royal families.

The circlet with the three blue jewels attached could see across the entire world. The basic principle was the same as a particle accelerator or an electron microscope. The Elements of fire, water, wind, and earth were focused and emitted to reveal the details of invisibly small sample materials.

Now. What if that could be used for more than revealing the structures of objects? What if a massive quantity of an Element could be focused on a single point and released all at once for destructive purposes?

It would produce an effect similar to a charged particle cannon that sent protons and electrons around circular rails large enough to surround the entire island of Ground's Nir, accelerated them to more than 90% the speed of light, guided them out the exit, and fired them into the outside world.

At the center of the partially-collapsed cathedral, the small brown girl whispered with the slender white angel's arms still in her back.

"...The *power* is this *great even without* Elder Mermaid Vivian."

Sibyl continued.

"That would be why it had to be split into three and guarded by the rulers of land, sea, and sky. But if we could use it in its proper way as well..."

The completed circlet allowed one to "see everything", so it would be easy to accurately target any life in that world.

All they needed was for Beatrice to produce a flame with her Magic-controlling Shining Weapon and flash it as an obvious sign. Then they could use

that signal to carry out a surefire bombing.

“Sibyl. *I have confirmed the bombing signal.*”

“Understood, Marinka. Then let’s end this. This one time only, we don’t need to hesitate. We are rulers! We must use our positions at the top to eliminate all chaos from this world!!”

Part 5

It was like an apocalyptic sword.

While giving instructions from the surface, Beatrice viewed it like drawing a line between two points.

She launched small fireballs from her rapier and embedded them in the ground at the destination points.

She sent one to a certain location and another to a different, more distant location.

Immediately, a blue light bright enough to blot out the sun fell from the sky. The width alone was more than twice that of Boo Boo's brick house. The dreadful beam shot accurately down toward the fireball Beatrice used and then slid more than 100 meters to the other fireball.

Everything in between was destroyed and a giant claw mark was left in the ground. It may have been similar to pressure. The rampaging Red Iberian Orcs immediately split to either side to avoid it and a few that did not escape in time were crushed down with the torn-up ground. They were knocked out in no time.

It was incredibly powerful, but that was why no errors were acceptable. That destructive power could even decapitate the Thousand Dragon if she was caught by it.

"Margin of error: +2."

The red-armored Holy Swordswoman gathered information on her rectangular frame and red lines and gave instructions like she was playing tsumeshogi.

"For the second and third shot, correct for the margin of error between the theoretical value and the actual coordinate and split the army in two once the

Reds have been driven away. Sacrifice the fourth shot to begin guiding them and use the fifth through seventh shots to defeat their main force. Fire.”

Several more thick lines were drawn and the Reds were overwhelmed while the disconcerting sound of the air frying surrounded them. White Witch Filinion held a flustered hand to her mouth as she watched.

“Awawa...”

She was not afraid of the enemy.

She was afraid of going too far. This was the same confusion as World War One.

“Th-this is crazy. The power inflation is out of control. I’m pretty sure we’re throwing open tons of doors that should really stay closed!”

“...I won’t say the technology itself is wrong, but I wonder if this is how the Wright Brothers and Einstein felt.”

Police Officer Armelina did not look exactly overjoyed either.

Meanwhile, Beatrice was skewered by countless gazes full of enough hostility to solidify the air. The Iberian Orcs were not stupid. They must have observed the situation and located the core of the problem. And since they could not immediately destroy the threat floating in the heavens, they would first crush Beatrice who was giving instructions from the surface.

And this naturally included the elder who led them.

“Test. Change the expected target to the elder and prepare for shots 9 and 10. Fire.”

She placed a fireball between herself and the Iberian Orc elder and a giant blade of blue light crushed and sliced into the ground. Then it slid. The incredibly powerful bombing tore through the ground and a second shot was fired after a short time delay. But the elder kicked off the air to jump around with lightning speed, just barely dodging the intersecting blades of the three royal families.

Who was more frightening here: the elder who could dodge the surefire attack that had taken out the rest of the Reds in a single sweeping motion, or

the Holy Swordswoman who could do all this while calling it a test?

Beatrice spoke to her partner while they stood back to back, protecting each other.

“...I knew it wouldn’t be, but I guess it won’t be that easy, Boo Boo.”

“Squeal.”

“He’ll probably be focused on me. Can you take care of the elder?”

“You need to ask? I can handle it all.”

She slowly calmed her breathing.

And she answered him without turning around.

“You show them you’re no longer that small Boo Boo who couldn’t do anything. Show them you can protect the people you care for!!”

The situation began moving once more.

The sound of someone kicking off the ground burst out.

Beatrice’s fireball instructions were the same as a flare gun: they relied on direct line of sight. To direct an accurate bombing from an advantageous position, she had to move there on her own two feet. Needless to say, Boo Boo had to do the same. He moved toward the elder who was charging toward Beatrice.

The elder could kick directly off of the air, so no matter how long his steps grew, he could find footing even in the middle of a leap. He could skip worrying about a landing point because he could accelerate and change direction at any time. He could attack in any direction, including overhead, and he could fight in midair, so his freedom of movement was on another level entirely. And differences in mobility led to differences in attack options.

His giant dark red hands no longer grabbed trees or boulders.

He was unarmed.

But that was the true fighting style of an Iberian Orc. Their incredible strength could tear off a bank vault’s door or a tank’s composite armor like they were made of pudding or yogurt. Simply opening and closing their hands was the

ultimate attack.

The Redness inside the elder was further stimulated and more of his bonds were removed.

Was his rampage fueled by his fear of the three royal treasures or his desire to fight the grown Iberian Orc before his eyes?

“!!”

“!?”

Boo Boo slammed his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon toward the dark red arm, but the elder placed his other hand on the side of that weapon. Her grabbed the Shining Weapon between his two hands and twisted it to pull it right out of Boo Boo’s grasp.

The elder twirled around to accelerate the horizontally-swinging blunt weapon like the hammer throw or a roundhouse kick.

Boo Boo grabbed it back and the two of them fought back and forth over the same Shining Weapon.

Another blue beam of light fell from heaven.

With an explosive blast, the brilliant destructive light swept through the Reds and the elder grabbed the Shining Weapon once more. They poured all their might into their hands for a test of strength while they glared at each other at extreme close range.

“What? Is that all your Red rampage can do?”

“...”

“I haven’t used my full strength yet. I’m still not out of breath. Because this isn’t my strength alone. I’m supported by everyone who got me here. And, elder, that includes you and everyone else who raised me in our village!!”

A blinding blue light passed close by, but they were too preoccupied to focus on it.

“So you don’t have to carry that burden any longer.”

Boo Boo did not succumb to the pressure in the elder’s eyes.

In the societies formed by animals like monkeys and lions, opposing the boss's decisions was to challenge them to a duel in order to become the new boss. Win or lose, the original relationship would never return.

He knew that, but he still said it.

“Elder, I will drag you down from your position as the strongest. We will save you, so it's time you went down!!”

Part 6

Boo Boo and Beatrice seemed to have everything under control on their own, but what about Filinon and Armelina?

“Watch out!!”

“Chief!!”

The pillars of blue light created by the three royal treasures were cutting across here and there, but Armelina’s Shining Weapon could transform into all sorts of blunt weapons. If she chose a metal boat or something else with a large surface area, it functioned as the strongest and sturdiest shield, so she was the one person who could survive being in the path of the blue. If she simply held up the shield, she would be crushed along with it, so she stabbed the bottom into the ground so the great pressure would escape into the ground.

The Iberian Orcs were not as stupid as their appearance would suggest, so they would learn a tactic they had already seen.

That meant the sturdier(?) types such as Armelina and Sutriona had to hold the Reds in place so they could not dodge the bombing based on Beatrice’s instructions.

Of course, if they attempted a direct contest of strength, they would be smashed to pieces.

They could only last a few seconds at the most.

What mattered was to Stun them just before the bombing hit. Even with such a large weapon in hand, she could still be killed instantly if she let her guard down. Armelina’s shield allowed her to block the blue beam if she could not escape in time, so it was a major point in her favor.

“Filin-...hey, you useless cow!! Why are you slacking off back there!? We’re gathering all the Reds together for the climax here!”

“There is something severely wrong with wanting to put your healer on the front line, you combat-obsessed meathead!! A-and they’re all giving me the most frightening looks. Eek, am I just so attractive that all of the Iberian Orcs have locked onto me!?”

“You’re giving off way too many pheromones, glasses cow.”

“But, Armelina, you’re directly contacting them on the front line there, so why aren’t they giving you any attention? Do they not see muscular Amazon warriors as wom-...”

“Beatrice, have them bomb the cow. What she just described applies to you too.”

A blue beam swept across the battle line, including where some of their allies were, so Filinion quickly rolled along the ground.

Armelina did not particularly want to be popular with berserk Iberian Orcs, but it was the principle of the thing.

The glasses girl was so unathletic that she could not roll in a straight line, ended up moving diagonally, and finally returned to her starting point.

“Are you trying to kill me, you idiot!!!???”

“Tch.”

“Ah, that tongue click sounded genuine...”

“You can’t handle being hit, but you’re not bad when it comes to dodging. Plus, you’ve probably got a few secret potions hidden up your sleeve, so you’d recover even if you lost a limb or a head.”

“Don’t act like I’m the rising star of some niche genre. Have you forgotten how easily I died in the Underworld? I can’t recover from those things over and over without Ileana-class ingredients.”

It was amusing how a plant’s trembling voice could be heard in the distance.

Armelina looked up at the sun overhead as she continued.

“Hmm, then I guess I’ll have to use the cow as bait without a recovery option.”

“Why!? If you want to lure in giant orcs, use meat on the bone or something. I don’t get why you have to have them chase after a witch like me!!”

“Maybe this annoying cow would make good bait if I tied her to the end of a fishing rod.”

The Fighter Priest could procure a metal ball on a chain, so that was not something Filinion could just laugh off.

“What are Wildefrau and Huldra doing on top of the Thousand Dragon? Hey, Filinion, if you’re *idle* with nothing to do, then climb up on the dragon’s back and heal her wounds. That’ll give us a greater fighting force. Bringing back a Break News should make a lot of difference, and it will also free up everyone busy treating her.”

“Eh? I finally get my *idol* debut? Wh-what do I even say? Sorry I can’t suppress all the charm radiating from me at all times, you losers.”

Armeline knocked down the useless piece of shit, wrapped her in a chain, and threw her onto the dragon’s back with something like the hammer throw. Assuming her lumps of fat had not been turned to cream by the centrifugal force, she would find something to do over there.

Just then, a new form raised their head over where the cow offering had been made. With the White Witch healer tossed over, the others must have been freed up just like Armeline had predicted.

This person’s long chestnut hair was spread wide behind her and her undeveloped maiden’s body was tightly contained in a leather bondage suit that included scorpion imagery.

“I, Summon Hunter Gruagach, have a proposal for the threat before my eyes. Iberian Orcs, if you desire a reason for your meaningless and chaotic violence, then reveal your true name and accept my contract.”

“You have guts dressing like that in front of a police officer!! Is it entrance exams? Or your love life? I don’t know what kind of stress you’re feeling, but do you want me to take you into protective custody on some really silly charges, you prestigious JK exhibitionist!!!???”

“Your justice obsession can wait!! Now, pure white Demon Lord Tselika,

provide your Charm to my body and words. In this place, there shall be no difference between yes and no and I shall receive unconditional agreement to all requests!!”

Gruagach made her proclamation while blushing and fidgeting her body (like it was too much for her to handle) and she caught one of the Reds. The nearly-4m giant floated up in defiance of gravity, twisted his body, and was taken inside an arrow.

It did not matter that he was afflicted by the Redness.

With the Summon Hunter and Tselika’s powers, any Nonhuman could be forcibly tied to a contract and have their power controlled. They had not done this before because the contract required confirmation from the Nonhuman’s mind. Waking up the dormant Iberian Orcs would have been suicide, but now that they were already awake, there was no need to hold back.

The Charm power borrowed from Tselika forcibly controlled him, had him nod his head regardless of what his free will said, and stole his power of the strongest.

With her body contained in her bondage outfit, Gruagach wielded her bow and several magic circles hovered in front of her right eye. And she spoke the same word that Beatrice had when commanding that largescale weapon.

“Fire.”

A dark red beam of light stabbed into the center of the identically-colored Reds.

It was their speed and weight that rose to the surface.

Perhaps because they normally hit things with blunt weapons, the destruction was more of a smashing than a piercing. Hit by an invisible shockwave and pressed into the ground as if by a suspended ceiling, several of the Reds sank down to the ground.

“I, Summon Hunter Gruagach, have a proposal for the threat before my eyes. Iberian Orcs, if you desire a reason for your meaningless and chaotic violence, then reveal your true name and accept my contract.”

Her words continued as the army faltered.

She only had to repeat the same text.

“Now, pure white Demon Lord Tselika, provide your Charm to my body and words. In this place, there shall be no difference between yes and no and I shall receive unconditional agreement to all requests!!”

First, she would bind a contract with an Iberian Orc and turn them into an arrow to reduce their numbers. Then she would use her newly-acquired arrow against the group for a definite result. It might be a small snowball to begin with, but once it began to roll down the snowy mountain, she was in complete control. Her power could increase endlessly. No one could stop her.

Of course, Beatrice’s bombing instructions continued throughout.

Beatrice and Gruagach.

Blue and red. The two forms of attack intersected and cut off the Iberian Orcs’ escape. They were finally able to set up a powerful crossfire. It took courage to charge in there even with a large shield.

But as said before, the Iberian Orcs were not stupid.

If their powerful bodies could withstand the fierce attack, they would eventually finish learning. They would get used to and find a countermeasure for even this extreme situation. They would read the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies that were unavoidable with humans in control and they would slip through the gaps to defeat the Holy Swordswoman and Summon Hunter at the center of it all.

However.

That was only if their supercomputer-level brains could function at full capacity.

With a flap of her red butterfly wings, the Fairy Queen laughed fiercely.

“Hwa ha ha!! Yes, yes. This sense of death constantly clinging to my back won’t leave me bored. Feeling this way might be wrong, but this is so much fun, Iberian Orcs. And you too are not content with *the boring kind of strongest that fights to prove it can’t lose!!*”

A small figure stood in the center of it all.

With Beatrice's blue bombing, Gruagach's red arrows, and the Red Iberian Orcs dodging and looking for a chance to counterattack, it had all devolved into a chaotic melee, but the Fairy Queen repeatedly moved in small circles as if dancing.

All while scattering her toxic blood wings, of course.

The Iberian Orcs had powerful digestive systems that could handle rotting meat and muddy water with ease, so they were highly resistant to toxins. Nevertheless, that Sandstorm of Red Madness was definitely jamming their ultra-high-precision thoughts.

That affected the Iberian Orcs' ability to learn and the bare minimum of safeties that prevented them from destroying themselves with their own powerful muscles.

One Red tripped over nothing and another doubled over like he had been hit by a body blow. Sutriona's slender and sensitive childlike arms and legs only deflected and parried the attacking blunt weapons and giant fists. The Reds were damaged by the Reds themselves. Their incredibly powerful muscles raged inside their bodies and applied pressure to their own blood vessels, nerves, and organs.

There was no such thing as an easy strongest that had no downsides whatsoever.

In fact, polarization was the essence of a strongest.

Just like a great sword specialized for strengthening a single attack would overbalance its wielder with its weight, just like feather armor sold for its light weight would be so fragile it broke the second it was hit, and just like the firearms humans had redeveloped in this world would strike the firer's shoulder or palm with their recoil.

Because each of the Break News specialized in a very narrow field, the Fairy Queen understood perfectly well how twisted the word "strongest" could be. There were compatibility issues between Break News and there was no single fixed peak. Whether or not the conditions or environment allowed one to take

advantage of the flaws and weakness created by that twistedness could greatly influence the overall battle.

Anyone who wanted to be the strongest had clearly never been the strongest.

Those who had that throne would return to the basics. Combat was more about chance and opportunity than individual skill. And those who had mastered such things understood why they were so frightening.

“When you get down to it, the most frightening thing is a collection of people with different powers. I’m not just being idealistic when I say everyone holding hands and working together is the strongest of the strongest. A mixture of poisons is more frightening than a single poison. When you are attacked from multiple directions at once, you may be able to cover for each other’s weaknesses.”

Sutriona flapped her red butterfly wings, put her hands on her hips, and smiled at the center of the most deadly and dangerous region.

“Reds, individually you might be the fearsome Iberian Orcs, but there is no such diversity in a group of the same species. And don’t call this unfair. Bringing together people of different species takes a lot of work. But your cards are limited because you relied on your individual strength and got lazy!!”

With that shout, the fierce toxin was scattered.

And as the confusion caused the Iberian Orcs’ movements to slow down a bit, Beatrice’s blue bombing and Gruagach’s red arrows mercilessly attacked in a crossfire.

“Intermingle, Iberian Orcs!! The door has been open from the beginning!! Instead of calling yourselves smelly, ugly, and pathetic as an excuse, put in the effort to make yourselves likeable! Then – and only then!! – will you too become a part of this strongest!!!!!!”

The elder and the others had seen their village afflicted by the Redness, despaired, and begged the Sage to kill them so they would not trouble anyone.

But that had not been the right thing to ask.

If many more people had worked together and if they had had the courage to

expose their weakness to all those people, the miracle about to occur here and now might have happened much, much sooner. I'm scared. It hurts. I want to live. I don't want to die. No matter how foolish, ugly, and stubborn it was, those puny wishes would have drawn in and connected them to a large group.

Perhaps no one would have had to die.

Perhaps the Sage never would have strayed.

Even if this was only a silly hypothetical and even if it would only be criticizing a past that never was, someone had to tell them off. Even if it had happened in the distant past, they could not pretend it had nothing to do with her. The Fairy Queen was not as short-lived as humans. Even with her long life, Sutriona had not known. She had lived on that island which was small enough for the humans to walk around in three days, but she had not known that the Sage and the Iberian Orcs were suffering in secret and had arrived at that foolish conclusion. Sutriona had seen herself as the strongest and lived in blissful ignorance.

"...Call it unfair if you like."

If she had known, she never would have let it happen.

And the Fairy Queen would not be the only one enraged by that thought.

They did not simply see themselves as the strongest.

True strongests were everywhere on this island.

"You fools ostracized yourselves without even trying, lost your lives in secret so as not to trouble anyone, and seriously believed that was a virtue, but I was blessed with another chance to reach out and grab your hands!! So I will *not* back down here. I will grasp your hands. I don't care if it takes resurrection, rebirth, or coming back from the dead. Even if it violates the rules set by the god in heaven, I will show you *lonely wannabe strongests* what a true strongest looks like!!"

With explosive breaths, the two of them inhaled as much oxygen as possible and then clashed head on. An unlimited period of anaerobic exercise had begun. Single combat between Iberian Orcs was about more than just the movements of their arms and legs. It was a game of chicken where whoever ran out of oxygen first would stop moving and be exposed to their opponent's fierce attacks.

As the two giant monsters moved through the thick and sticky air, the air spiraled around, was intensely compressed, and produced the same fiery ignition as a diesel engine. The change was not limited to their hands and feet. Their entire bodies were enveloped in flames, but neither of them had time to grimace in pain.

They swam through the unpleasantly viscous air.

Boo Boo held a Shining Weapon that resembled a log or steel beam.

The elder approached while emptyhanded.

This was about more than just taking damage to do even more damage. Slight injuries were of no consequence. In this single combat, everything was determined by their remaining oxygen level.

Boo Boo was nearly 4 meters and the elder may have reached 5 meters.

That difference in size was directly related to lung size, amount of hemoglobin in the blood, and amount of oxygen taken in with each breath. And because Boo Boo carried a heavy weapon, he would consume oxygen at a greater rate.

The elder had the advantage in both intake and consumption.

Thus, it did not matter if his flesh was split or his bones smashed. No matter how much he was injured along the way, Boo Boo would be the first to run out of oxygen and stop moving. This was an anatomic issue, so it could not be overcome with psychological effort. Once it was over, the elder only had to make a fierce rush of attacks to finish off his target with even more damage than was done to him.

He only had to last until the end.

He did not need to take any risks. Victory would be his if he did things like

normal, so there was no need to lower his gear to match his opponent and deflect each and every one of his opponent's attacks.

He seemed to be fighting, but he was actually fleeing.

Since he was working toward a meaningless victory at the behest of the Redness, it was unclear if the win would be a happy thing for him or not.

But.

Just then.

Boo Boo's giant Shining Weapon suddenly flipped around. This worked against its center of gravity and threatened to destroy his shoulder joint. Had the young Iberian Orc tried to rush a major technique before the oxygen level caught up to him? No.

The elder recognized this action. It was the technique he and the others had lent Boo Boo just once when he was unable to save Beatrice when she had tried to kill the Elkiad leader out of rage upon learning the truth about the attack on the Iberian Orc village.

It was a secret martial arts technique only known by the Iberian Orcs.

Instead of his arm strength, he moved the weapon like a wing, adjusted the angle, and used how it swam through the air to twist its trajectory.

That allowed him to move it at a sharper angle than his muscles alone would have allowed for.

And it has already been stated countless times that the Iberian Orcs were not stupid. If he had used a tactic once, he would have analyzed it and made it his own.

This was the same.

He had inherited it.

At that moment, Boo Boo had reached the same level as the elder, so there was naturally an absolute difference between the one who was pouring every last effort into challenging his opponent and the one who was trying to safely escape from the battle.

Boo Boo had said from the beginning that he would never forget them for saving Beatrice.

As Boo Boo's Shining Weapon flipped around, it ignited the air around it and slid just outside of the elder's grasp. Then the giant blunt weapon continued on as if crawling up from the elder's wrist to his shoulder.

If you are a human born on Earth, you can picture it like taking aim with a handgun.

And after following the arm from the wrist to the shoulder, it naturally pointed at the face.

This was a repeat of that day. Everything was the same as when the Iberian Orc souls had taught him the secret technique needed to protect the life of someone he cared for.

It was like a student sparring with his teacher and showing off the technique he had learned to make sure he was doing it right.

In that final moment, the Red-afflicted elder smiled faintly.

Was anything more joyous for a teacher than seeing their student surpass them?

He smiled and tried to catch Boo Boo's attack on the tusks that were like his final defense.

There was of course no need to hold back.

Those thick tusks broke.

Boo Boo's blunt weapon sank into the elder's face and swiftly knocked him unconscious.

Part 8

High in the sky, the false sun island had lost its light.

“...Phew.”

Royal Elf Sibyl sighed and opened her closed eyes while wearing the circlet bearing the blue jewels of the three royal families. Those treasures allowed her to see everything in the world, but it seemed to place a greater burden on her mind than she had expected. Sweat was pouring from her body, but her extremities felt chilled to the core. It felt a lot like when she had gone days without sleep working with the Sage. The improper body temperature control meant her autonomic nerves were malfunctioning.

Archangel Marinka, who had been assisting her, called out to her.

The small brown girl spoke with the slender white woman's arms in her back.

“What *happened*?”

“The Red Iberian Orcs have been incapacitated. The defeated ones have been entered into a contract with the Summon Hunter and her power has sealed their actions. The extraordinary elder was the one concern, but the child of the forest settled things with him.”

They were at a high enough altitude to see the stars when they looked up, but that distance from the surface meant nothing to the power of the hidden treasures. Sibyl understood the state of the battlefield like she held it in the palm of her hand.

“The effects of the Hero's artificial atmospheric barrier should remain for a while after its destruction, but this prevents any chaos during that braking period. Now we just wait for the Red effects to fade away.”

“...Does that mean *that Summon Hunter human* has the power of *Demon Lord Tselika* and an entire village of Iberian Orcs *all to herself*? *My, my*. We may need

to designate a new Break News.”

She did not seem to be joking.

After all, if the Iberian Orcs went berserk, they could destroy two worlds. One only had to consider what it meant for that power to be under a single individual’s control.

Just as the Sage’s life had been entirely changed by the incredible amount of Experience Points she received one day, humans were short-lived but quick to change. They provided nothing but surprises for a Royal Elf who lived for so very long.

At any rate, things had calmed down for the time being.

The power balance would remain unstable, but that concern was proof that they could focus on something other than the immediate threat.

So.

She may have let her guard down for just a moment.

The problem was solved and the burden had been unexpectedly great. Due to that, Sibyl removed the all-seeing circlet from her forehead, but that was a definite mistake. If she had left it on, she might have sensed the signs and prevented it.

Those girls stood on the reverse side of the false sun, but a crackling sound came from even further overhead. It was a lot like the flashing of electricity. Sibyl and Marinka both looked to the cathedral’s ceiling. And through the collapsed hole there, they saw...

“...The artificial *atmospheric* barrier?”

“Oh, no...”

Royal Elf Sibyl pushed back her exhaustion and quickly placed the circlet back on her head.

And she learned the truth.

Because she could see everything, that forest ruler understood all too well.

“Oh, no!!!!!!”

Part 9

What about that inorganic object produced this *result*?

Was it revenge for being destroyed? Or was it interest in the new peak that had defeated even the strongest Iberian Orcs?

Regardless, the artificial atmospheric barrier covering the world – that false umbrella created by the Hero who wanted to live – flashed ominously despite no longer functioning due to the hole broken in it. It almost seemed to be surrounded by a blood-red aurora.

And.

And.

And.

Part 10

With an explosive boom, a red high-voltage current stabbed down from the sky like the bursting of a broken cathode ray tube or neon tube.

It tore through the sun island but did not stop there. It continued straight down toward the ground.

The floating island in the middle did not matter.

“!?”

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice did not even have time to react.

It fell and it burst.

“Gahhhh!!!???”

“Beatrice!!”

It pierced her entire body, so Boo Boo screamed her name and ran over despite his pain and exhaustion. His large hand supported the girl as she just about collapsed to her knees.

“Boo...Boo...?”

“Don’t worry. You’re still alive. So we can fix this. Filinion!! Squeal, please save Beatrice!!”

However.

For some reason, Filinion and Armelina stood stock still without approaching. Wildefrau and Huldra poked their heads up from the Thousand Dragon’s back and they tensed up once they realized what had happened.

Boo Boo did not understand.

It was true Beatrice’s armor had burst and she was badly injured, but she was still breathing. Human Magic could heal any wounds, so there was no reason to

panic. This was not worth letting his heart pound with terror. He had to believe that.

And yet.

The humans who could use techniques he did not understand looked like they had seen the end of the world. He wanted them to stop because it worried him, but none of them would listen to his request.

“Beatrice, you...”

Finally, Police Officer Armelina hesitantly opened her mouth.

“...Is your Shining Weapon all right? Hey!!”

“?”

Only after hearing that did Boo Boo catch on.

Beatrice’s grip had been weakened by the red lightning strike, so her Shining Weapon rapier had fallen to the ground.

No.

Wait!?

“The blade is...broken?”

It had been destroyed.

This was not a normal sort of destruction. It seemed to have burst from within.



It was like the burden on her armor and miniskirt, which were Magic given that form, had been too great and it had surged back into the Shining Weapon.

The hilt was caught on her slender fingertips, but there was no blade beyond that. The decorations had blown off and the blade was lying on the ground after breaking off at the base. That was why it looked as if she had dropped it. Bluish-white sparks occasionally scattered from the broken end of the hilt. Their intensity was gradually weakening, so they would eventually cease altogether.

The Shining Weapon was becoming nothing more than scrap metal.

“Without her Shining Weapon, she can’t use the Gates to return to Earth.”

Filinion seemed to have difficulty breathing, but she managed to get the words out to Boo Boo bit by bit.

“And humans can only stay in Ground’s Nir for a few days. With things like this...*there is no saving Beatrice!!*”

Part 11

Was this the curse of the long-dead Hero?

The ancient fear and suffering at the source of it all was now weighing on Holy Swordswoman Beatrice.

Between the Lines 3

I finally

Chapter 4: Challenging an Utterly Impossible Obstacle

Part 1

As evening turned to night, the ground shook.

Upon learning the Reds were no longer active, the humans raised a battle cry of victory that shook the distant mountain where Boo Boo and the others were. The solid ground was shaken by nothing more than human voices and the emotion of excitement. Dry bursting sounds, cheers, and laughter blended together. They may have been having a celebration with special food and drink brought from the partially-repaired inn town.

However.

Boo Boo did not have time to even look in the party's direction.

Time was the enemy.

There was some variance between individuals, but a few days was the limit. And Beatrice had already used up a lot of that time on dealing with the Red Iberian Orcs. They did not have a single minute or second to spare. Their only option was to rack their brains and list out every idea they could think of.

Armeline looked overhead.

"The artificial atmospheric barrier has been silent ever since. Did that attack bring it to a stop, or was that an irregular situation even for it? But I guess that's fine since we'd have bigger problems than treating Beatrice if it kept firing those."

“Squeal. What is a Shining Weapon? Can’t she borrow one of the ones all of you are using?”

“Each Shining Weapon is limited to a single person, so you can’t borrow someone else’s. It would also be difficult to bring a new Shining Weapon from Earth to Ground’s Nir because the authentication work is generally done using machines on Earth. They really are your lifeline, so you’re screwed if you lose yours.”

“Ch-chief. Is there no way to repair a Shining Weapon?”

“...It is technically possible, but we’re talking about a collection of precision machinery. We would have to construct a handmade semiconductor factory with full sterilization. We only have a few days left, so there simply isn’t enough time.”

“What about the bottom of the Labyrinth? Ultimate Weapon Abyss is a mechanical doll, right?”

“That uses entirely different standards from what we use on Earth. It seems we can connect our Shining Weapons with Abyss using a cable, but that only works because Abyss is adjusting her registry to match. Her normal methods would not work.”

“I-if it comes to it, I could get Ileana’s help to create a powerful resurrection potion. We could always just resurrect her every few days...”

“Only you could do that, glasses freak. A normal human would go mad.”

With that, Armelina scratched at her hair.

Then she breathed a heavy sigh.

“...Sorry.”

“No, we are not looking for solace through nice-sounding words. We need a realistic solution, so we cannot run from the severe hurdles.”

They were discussing it like this because Beatrice was unconscious.

Who could directly tell her that she could no longer Sign Out and she could only wait for death as her body and mind were slowly eaten away?

The man known as Omega, who had reigned at the top of the Western forces during the Cold War, had lost his life due to a plot abusing the inability to Sign Out. And even with Demon Lord Tselika by his side, he had been unable to alter his fate. That showed how dire the situation was.

This was not something that could be overcome with great historical deeds or cheap, dime-a-dozen miracles.

The battered girl's chest quietly rose and fell in Boo Boo's large hand.

After hearing what Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau had said, Gruagach hesitantly raised a hand.

"Tselika, you fought against this exact problem before, didn't you?"

"...I am not aware of any method to truly transfer a human-sized object between worlds."

A translucent demon woman with an angel's halo and large horns floated next to Gruagach.

She held her bewitching body in her arms like she did not know what to do with it.

"More importantly, if you have people with high-level potion and freezing skills, I would suggest using cold sleep. It will only delay the inevitable, but it will remove the time limit of a few days. If all you need to do is prepare a semiconductor factory, then you can build one even if it takes years."

"That really is *the last resort*, isn't it?" responded Armelina with a heavy sigh.

Rusalka, whose long blonde ponytail formed a gorgeous ringlet curl, spoke up while tugging on Gruagach's leather outfit.

"Onee-sama, can't we get help from the Sage? She seems familiar with Shining Weapons and she looks just like Beatrice. Um, couldn't it be possible for them to use the same Shining Weapon?"

Everyone except for unconscious Beatrice glanced over at the Sage who was sitting with her back against a broken tree trunk.

That person, who looked a lot like Beatrice but was completely different, shook her head.

“It depends on the amount of damage, but from the look of things, it’s unrepairable. The internal structure being fried hurts a lot more than the blade breaking off. In fact, I’ve never seen one destroyed like that before. Also, Beatrice and I are similar but not identical. We cannot use the same Shining Weapon.”

“You hacked our Shining Weapons at the Underworld, right!? Surely there’s some kind of trick you can use!!”

“Simply remote controlling one is entirely different from altering the administrative permissions. In fact, you would have better luck asking Omega who increased the strength of his by having his men open up shared settings on theirs.”

“Huh? But what about Sibyl’s Shining Weapon?” asked Filinion. “And wasn’t your patchwork rapier made by rewriting the permissions of those stolen weapons?”

“Yes, that’s right. Miss Titties is exactly right. But doing that requires wiping the contents. Try to fix her broken Shining Weapon with a clean install and you’ll only wipe out all the files that survived. When you get down to it, what Omega did was just plain crazy.”

That must have reminded her of someone important to her because the translucent Demon Lord with an angel halo and large horns softly shut her eyes. Almost like she was offering a silent prayer.

Another insurmountable hurdle had been placed in their path.

Upon the annihilation of the Underworld Lord, the souls of the dead had been released. They could never again summon that veteran hero. The cowboy hat skeleton was technically only a simulation of his personality, so he would not necessarily have the same technical information as Omega.

Armeline gulped.

“...So we’re finally stuck.”

“You should think about what options are available. Especially with such a short time limit.” The Sage sounded unconcerned. “One, you can run high-level VR experiments using Ultimate Weapon Abyss. Two, based on that bombing

used in the battle against the elder, Sibyl must have acquired something. If she has the power to see everything, she might be able to use that to find a starting point.”

However.

A certain possibility came to mind and Boo Boo worriedly asked about it.

“...What if that isn’t enough?”

“A perfect virtual reality and the power to see everything are cruel in their own ways, Boo Boo.”

The Sage remained callous even now.

It may have been her ability to provide cruel opinions at all times that allowed her to be the Sage.

“They may present us with the fact that nothing we can do will work.”

Part 2

He knew all he could do at the moment was wait, but he could not just sit around.

Burning heat erupted inside his body and he could not sit still.

“Boo...”

Boo Boo walked through the dark forest.

He scraped his large tusk against a nearby tree.

“Let Beatrice get better soon.”

With that statement, he moved to the next tree.

“Let Beatrice get better soon.”

Then to the next tree. And the next. And the next.

“Let Beatrice get better soon.”

He looked like he would mark every tree in the forest if left to his own devices.

And someone was watching him from a short distance away.

It was silver-haired Fairy Queen Sutriona and blonde-haired Vampire Kallikantzaros.

They were both Break News with incredible power.

“Anyway, Vampire, did you never notice the color of the sky before? Don’t you claim to control lunar eclipses?”

“Make no mistake. The moon was always shaped like that. In fact, the culprit may have based the false sky and sun on it.”

The skinny silver-haired girl in a black ribbon dress breathed an exasperated sigh.

“...More importantly, what is Boo Boo doing?”

“Probably an Iberian Orc good luck charm,” smoothly responded the Vampire who was connected to the Iberian Orcs in a different way from the Sage.

Kallikantzaros, who wore a red negligee over a body far too alluring for her childish appearance, continued.

“But if it actually worked, the Iberian Orcs would not have been afflicted by that Redness.”

“Hm.” Sutriona gave her old Vampire acquaintance a sidelong glance. “You sure have strange tastes to accompany him when you know it’s meaningless.”

“Night is the Vampire’s time. Although it seems I too was manipulated by that false sun. Still, there is not always something I can do. ...Besides, Fairies are active in the day and sleep at night, so it seems far more unusual for one of them to be wandering around at this hour.”

Sutriona coughed to avoid responding.

“You are even simpler than the Iberian Orcs,” sighed Kallikantzaros. “But I believe that good luck charm requires carving the mark into 1000 trees. Surely he doesn’t really plan to do that.”

“Oh, he’ll do it. Even if it’s just for peace of mind, he’ll still set up that defensive line.”

“ ... ”

The Vampire in a red negligee and nightcap fell silent.

She watched the nearly-4m giant scraping his tusk against another tree, she crossed her arms such that they squished her large breasts, and she winked.

“...Is it that serious?”

“Is what?”

“I had thought that young Iberian Orc was so fond of that human because she was convenient for him. The humans threw rocks at him, but she would actually speak with him. So to put it another way, it could have been anyone he could speak with. I thought that was all it was.”

“Kallikantzaros.”

A voice called her name.

The light in the Fairy Queen’s eyes had changed entirely at some point.

“Do you want me to punch you for real?”

“...I see. So there was a reason why it had to be that girl. Very well.”

“?”

“Life and the sunlight are your territory, but death and the shadows are mine. There is an option that opens up for me.”

Vampire Kallikantzaros turned her gaze toward the distance once more.

Most likely, that Iberian Orc would not stop until he really had completed it. And even if he did leave marks on 1000 trees, he could not shake the forlorn feeling of having his mother or someone even more important let go of his hand.

And the Vampire knew of an extremely quick solution that amounted to cheating.

The Fairy Queen sounded somewhat exasperated as her silver hair fluttered behind her.

“I thought you didn’t answer people’s prayers.”

“Only if they are seeking some kind of reward. I am not narrow-minded enough to abandon a child lost in the night.

Part 3

White Witch Filinion's Recovery Potion was perfectly made.

"Nn. Nhh..."

When Beatrice sat up and stretched her arms like normal, a strong foliage smell reached her nose. She looked around and found a somewhat nostalgic sight. It looked just like Boo Boo's original house, the triangular tent made of large, folded leaves that he had used before the log and brick ones.

And she realized something.

"Gh."

When she got up and the blanket fell away, she found she was only wearing a single white cloth. It looked a lot like a swimsuit since the top and bottom were connected, but it was basically underwear. Think of it like a bodysuit that bared the midriff.

The armor covering her limbs and chest and the miniskirt around her hips were nowhere to be found.

(...Oh. So that's what happened.)

The Holy Swordswoman jumped a bit when she belatedly noticed a slender form lying right next to her in the darkness. It was a girl with one arm entirely missing and her head tilted at a slightly odd angle. Two strands of mottled silver hair passed in front of her shoulders, so this was apparently Ultimate Weapon Abyss. Beatrice had not sensed her presence because she did not need to breathe or even stir.

And one other thing.

"Beatrice, are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Wah, wah! B-Boo Boo?"

Beatrice frantically pulled the blanket up to her chest and blushed a little.

The air that snuck in was somewhat chilly and the darkness was swept away by the gentle light of a simple lamp made by filling a porcelain bowl with plant oil and adding a twisted scrap of cloth as a wick. The girl guessed it was nighttime.

It did not have the obvious shape of a bra and panties, but she was only wearing underwear. Beatrice restlessly held the blanket to her chest and looked around.

“Where are we?”

“My house was destroyed, so I made a new one.”

Those words alone brought a slight cloud to the Holy Swordswoman’s face. There had been more than exhaustion and pain from the intense battle. She was worried about the way Boo Boo thought it was only natural that his things were taken from him or destroyed.

Meanwhile, when looking at it from a different perspective...

...That made Boo Boo sad.

This was not the time for her to worry about others. She had always worried about him and helped him in every way she could, but he also understood that she had a tendency to neglect herself in the process.

He could not let it show on his face.

Worrying her here would not solve anything.

“Squeal. If you’re awake, you can eat something. Eat a bunch and get better! I saved the tastiest meat for you!!”

“Ah, ah ha ha. It’s always meat first thing after waking up with you...”

Filinion’s Recovery Potion had healed the direct injuries and burns, so she had no trouble moving around. She reached for her hip out of habit and then sighed.

“What happened with the elder and the others?”

“Gruagach stopped all of them, so it’ll be okay. They’re working with the Sage

to remake the village right now. The effects of the Redness have left their bodies, but they said they wanted to work with someone on some strength-focused work and details-focused to make sure everything is in order. They all said it's thanks to you destroying the...artificial atmospheric barrier? Or something like that."

"Where are Filinion, Armelina, and the others?"

"They should be in the human inn town. After all the confusion, they said they needed to explain some things to everyone. They're apparently having a festival there, so they might bring some tasty snacks back!"

The girl who had spent so much time with Boo Boo held a hand to her mouth and giggled at his excitement.

Was she simply happy to see the Iberian Orc celebrating, or was she happy to see him interested in the humans?

"Hey, Boo Boo."

"Yeah?"

Beatrice gave a plain smile.

And she asked.

"...So have you heard how much time I have left?"

He had been careless.

Even though he knew little of Magic, he should have noticed.

Beatrice had reached for her hip out of habit. She had been checking for her Shining Weapon rapier. It was a casual movement of her fingers, but that had told her the truth: her Shining Weapon had been destroyed and she could not return to Earth.

She also lacked her equipment.

It was not that she was not producing the armor to cover her body. She could not produce it.

"Beatrice..."

"It's okay, Boo Boo. You don't need to give me that look."

Boo Boo gasped and patted his large face, but Beatrice shook her head. She was always the mature one. Hiding it from her may have been impossible from the get-go.

The girl in her underwear still held the blanket to her chest.

"I don't have to explore the Labyrinth or save the world from a crisis. That gives me more time to simply spend with you. I feel like I never made time to just take it easy in Ground's Nir. Looking at it that way, it's not all bad."

"..."

"And I'm not going to keel over right away. I still have time. So tell me, Boo Boo. I want to know the specifics if I'm going to face this. Will you help me find a way out of this situation?"

"Okay."

Boo Boo nodded again and again.

He seemed to be trying to convince himself more than anyone.

"I'll help you. The elder and the others were only saved because of your efforts. I can't just sit around and fret. There's no time, so we have to do what we can. So I'll work super hard for you this time!!"

"Boo Boo."

"Right. According to Abyss and Sibyl, you have about 2 days left! There's still time, so we'll do everything we can and save you. And the first step is to eat!!"

The leaf house had no stove, so he was probably cooking the food at a campfire outside. He rushed out of the house.

For that brief moment, Beatrice was alone with only deactivated Abyss for company. She reached for her hip out of habit and then slowly sighed.

"Well."

No one was listening, but the words softly spilled from her lips.

"...I guess this time there really is no hope."

Part 4

Beatrice and Boo Boo sat around the campfire for a late dinner.

She was still only in her underwear, so she had wrapped the blanket around herself before stepping outside.

When he cooked, you were lucky if you got a giant hunk of cooked mystery meat and he would not even add salt unless you asked. He did not focus much on the cooking, so there was always a chance of getting something half raw. ... But today there were also a few vegetables he had presumably taken from his garden. He may have been thinking about her health.

“Beatrice, this one and this one are the tastiest. You can have them.”

“Hm? You can have the tastiest ones. You’re the one that made it all.”

“No! You need to eat right now!!”

“Whoa, but all this fatty meat is a little much for a maiden like me...!!”

It had taken some doing to get to this point, but as long as he added some rock salt, his cooking was good in a plain sort of way. Salt and grease had a way of soaking into your body.

“I made some dessert today too.”

“Oh? That’s unusual for you.”

“I chilled it in the river, so I has to be good. Jewel Melons are rare and I know you’ll be surprised when you see it!”

Boo Boo left for the river where the fruit was chilling.

Once she was alone, Beatrice breathed a soft sigh with the blanket wrapped over her underwear.

And just then...

“I will be joining you.”

“?”

The Holy Swordswoman turned toward that soft voice and saw someone who looked completely at home in the night.

It was a childish blonde girl who wore a pitch black swimsuit visible through a bright red negligee. No, she was quite short, but her body may have been even curvier than Beatrice's. ...Especially when it came to chest size.

She was a Vampire and a Break News.

It was Kallikantzaros.

She kept a set distance from the campfire as if she disliked non-natural lights.

“Sutriona told me what happened. I could not join the fight as it occurred while the sun was at its peak. The Iberian Orcs are special to me as well, so I thank you for risking your life to stop their rampage.”

“I see... Based on that, I take it I can trust what Boo Boo said about the other Iberian Orcs. I passed out before the end, you see.”

“So what will you do?”

The Vampire held a gray pig doll, spoke with a cunning voice, and gently looked the girl in the eye.

“Let us discuss the concept of life. The undead have no interest in unstable souls, but I am willing to make an exception since you used your one-and-only life to fight for the Iberian Orcs. You cannot return to Earth without your Shining Weapon. And you have no chance of survival without returning to Earth. Boo Boo and the others will of course forgo sleep as they spend the next two days attempting to find a solution, but there is no guarantee they will find one before the time limit arrives.”



“And you have approached me. So do you have a suggestion?”

“I am a Vampire.”

Kallikantzaros stuck the index finger of her empty hand between her lips. She bent the finger like a hook and tugged her small mouth to the side.

That might sound like a child’s teasing, but it held a very different meaning here.

She revealed a sinister weapon that was far sharper than a human canine tooth.

That fang was the symbol of her kind.

“Your human body cannot endure staying in this world for an extended period of time due to a slight margin of error in the atmospheric composition and the planetary rotation and revolution. *Then you only need to become something other than a human of Earth.* I try to only target Iberian Orcs since I dislike the flavor of human blood, but as I said, I am willing to make an exception here. I can bear with the flavor. If you ask for it, I will turn you into a Vampire right here and now.”

Beatrice thought about it for a while.

This gave her a backup plan. In her current state, she should have wanted that more than anything.

However.

After taking her time, she slowly shook her head.

“...I have to reject your offer.”

“Why?”

“I apologize if this sounds like an insult, but the person who Boo Boo can rely on without worry isn’t ‘Vampire Beatrice’.”

Boo Boo’s worried look was burned into her mind’s eye.

She saw him telling those painfully obvious lies.

But that was exactly why.

She could not just compromise on this. If she rewrote it all with such a simple decision, there would be no going back. That was the way she saw it. Being a human born on Earth must have held more meaning for her than she thought.

Kallikantzaros smiled thinly.

And she showed respect for that resolve.

“This will not be easy.”

“I know that.”

“Very well. I will not force it upon you, but I have provided the temptation. Knowing and not knowing are two very different things. As you humans apparently say, a drowning man will grasp at straws. I will be watching from behind the scenes to see if your resolve wavers as you are slowly crushed beneath the pain and fear.”

A quiet sound followed.

By taking a single step back, Kallikantzaros truly withdrew into the shadows, but she did leave one last statement.

“However.”

“?”

“...Even if you do break and pathetically cling to this option, I will not laugh at you. Because I definitely owe you one for the Iberian Orc incident. For this one time only, I will promise you that.”

That was all.

The Vampire faded into the pitch black shadows and Beatrice was alone once more.

“Squeal! Look, look, Beatrice! This is a Jewel Melon!!”

“Oh, Boo Boo?”

“Hm? What’s with you? Did something happen?”

“No, it’s nothing,” she answered with a smile and a shake of the head.

Yes.

Because of her resolve, nothing had happened.

Part 5

Of course, Boo Boo did not rest after putting Beatrice to bed in the leaf house. White Witch Filinion and Fighter Priest Armelina had set up a new base in the Cave of Tears opened in the coastal cliff face. Even with the celebration bringing everyone's guard down, they could not bring Boo Boo to the human-filled inn town, but they also could not hold a planning meeting in front of Beatrice whose life was on the chopping block. Since neither of their usual meeting spots was usable, they had needed a new one.

...Boo Boo wondered how he had lived such an aimless life up until now.

He had built a house of large leaves, searched for food in the forest, and spent any extra time napping. Had he really been making the most of his life? If he had done other things and made more valuable use of his time, could he maybe have found an immediate solution when someone important to him was in a crisis?

He had grown complacent.

So much had happened in the past, so he should have known that his current environment was not guaranteed to last forever. Yet he had been satisfied with what he was given. He had been so happy on that day when he had been reunited with Beatrice and he had failed to keep working after that.

"Squeal... I need to do something."

That ocean cave also contained Demon Lord Tselika's collection of treasures. The entrance area received the full brunt of the advancing and receding waves and it could flood at any time, but there were more slopes further in and the seawater had almost no effect there. Since there was no way in from the Labyrinth, it was a rare blank spot where no one else on the small island could reach them.

The outside moonlight reflected off the seawater and rock walls, so the inside

was filled with a faint bluish light. It gave the scene a strange shine different from a fire or luminous moss.

“So you’re here, Boo Boo.”

He was addressed by someone who looked an awful lot like the red-armored Holy Swordswoman. It was the Sage. Slender Royal Elf Sibyl stood alongside her.

“I was just explaining my investigation of the problems we face. No one else here is worth explaining things to, so this is perfect.”

The glasses White Witch and police officer Fighter Priest clearly grimaced at that, but it was unusual for these former enemies to be meeting together at all.

The red of embers was added to the bluish light of the Cave of Tears.

The Sage snapped her fingers and the cave scene changed. Even the clinging darkness and the pale blue light that blocked one’s view like a backlight functioned as a veil to hide the answer before one’s eyes.

The walls and ceiling were crammed full of geometric patterns drawn in black lines seemingly made with charcoal. Naturally, this was not just graffiti. Each point at the intersection of two lines was labeled with a symbol and it seemed to control some kind of “current”.

“Well, to put it simply, this is the circuit diagram of Beatrice’s Shining Weapon,” smoothly explained the Sage.

The handle of Beatrice’s rapier had contained the circuitry that filled every surface of the cave.

“Keihin Seibi’s Etranger D-508ex. Since she was confined to the impressive-sounding Detached Magic Palace, I was surprised to find she uses a customized version of a commercial product, but that may have been to ensure ease of replacing parts in case of a malfunction. She apparently has some capable maids, so its specs have been greatly improved from clocking up the software side of things.”

“...You’ve made that much progress? Then what were those two hours of cynicism and sarcasm for???”

The young glasses woman gave an exhausted comment, but it was not the

time for that.

The Sage remained composed after having wasted so much time because she was not interested in starting until Boo Boo showed up.

“I retrieved the diagram from the manufacturer on Earth and Sibyl used her secret treasures to view the broken rapier. Comparing the two revealed what portions are missing. The worst damage is here.”

She breathed a gentle sigh and a few sparks spilled from her palm and circled around a certain point on the circuit diagram covering the cave’s surfaces. The college girl shrine maiden known as Filinion saw it like a laser pointer on a lecture room’s whiteboard.

“That’s the personal authentication area that manages administrative privileges...in other words, who the Shining Weapon belongs to. In cellphone terms, it’s something like the SIM card that contains all the profile settings. Unless we fix this, Beatrice cannot return to Earth.”

“Squeal?”

Boo Boo tilted his head with a large hand over his mouth, but that did not mean he had stopped thinking. Iberian Orcs used their supercomputer-like brains to control each individual muscle fiber so they did not destroy their own body with their overly powerful muscles. He might not understand it now, but he was sure to learn. He only had to reach that understanding before they ran out of time. The Sage had lived with the elder and the others, so she understood that and was trying to fill him with as much data as possible.

But was the Sage leading that brilliant brain to the answer?

Even though Boo Boo did not understand at all, clenched his teeth, and struggled to make up for how far behind he felt?

“Hey.” Armelina put a hand on her hip. “So you’re saying the transfer function survived?”

“If *that was all we needed*, we wouldn’t need to rely on her broken rapier. That blunt weapon hanging at Boo Boo’s hip is a Shining Weapon too, after all.”

But he could not save anyone by giving Beatrice his partner that resembled a

log or a steel beam.

The management was not lax enough to let her just borrow one.

She could not just head home and be done with it. There was a reason they used terms like Sign In and Sign Out. The technology to move between worlds only qualified as a transfer system once a safe arrival was guaranteed. That meant there would naturally be powerful safeties to ensure who was being sent in addition to the origin point and destination point. Because they needed to transfer exactly 100% of a person, not 99% or 101%.

Boo Boo desperately worked his mind with his head still tilted.

“You mean Beatrice’s name is written inside her sword? And that was erased, so we have to write it in there again?”

“Exactly right, Boo Boo.”

The Sage applauded with a smile she would never give any of the others.

“Rewriting the settings profile from scratch would be difficult, so we’ll have to extract the damaged data and recover it. Of course, the data left inside the damaged rapier is incomplete, so we can’t just use that. But that means we only have to fill in the gaps.”

“I sometimes see ads for services that recover lost data from your cellphone or flash memory, but does it really work that well?”

“Since you had the courage to admit your own ignorance, I will explain. Even if there are pieces missing, it is possible to fill that in by estimating the contents using the strings of data preceding and following it. It might be simpler to think of it like the frames of a movie or cartoon. Ten minutes or a full hour missing would be one thing, but if it’s just a frame or two here and there, it isn’t a major problem. You can fill in the gaps.”

But on the other hand...

“To recover the data, we must first extract detailed information on how much of the data is left inside the broken rapier.”

“Squeal? But I thought we could see everything with Sibyl’s treasure?”

The long-eared slender girl sighed and answered Boo Boo’s question.

“I can see it, but I cannot explain it. If I draw out the miniscule grooves of the circuit diagram, the Sage can create a proper diagram using her own rules, but this concept of an...electronic program? That is something else entirely.”

“Well, yes. Long ago, there were apparently people with the shocking ability to read the do-re-mi scale by looking at the grooves on a record, but no matter how much they stared at the smooth surface of a smartphone, they could never learn anything about a song contained in a compressed file on the device. Poo hoo hoo.”

“...I have no idea what that means, but I can still tell you’re making fun of me...”

“Heh. Eh heh heh. Whatever gives you that-...owwww!?! This flat Amazon warrior elf just hit my boobs with her bowstring!”

“I hit my own long ears a lot when I was first learning to use it, so I know its power. ...And that insult has earned you another hit.”

The hunter pursued her fleeing prey and Armelina sounded somewhat exasperated as she watched.

“Are you saying we can’t directly check the software, so we have to start by reconnecting the fried hardware circuits to access it?”

“Precisely. So the ignorant have reached an understanding in their ignorance.”

The Sage nodded and brought a hand to her hip.

The patchwork rapier in the scabbard there had its processing power forcibly increased by connecting together the remains of multiple Shining Weapons, so she would know how to connect to the broken Shining Weapon.

The red-armored and white-miniskirted Sage twisted the corners of her mouth into a smile.

“There is no need to be so pessimistic. The area needing repairing is smaller than a postage stamp.”

“But like with microfilm, how much space does that fill when it’s expanded to a size visible to the human eye? ...You make it sound simple, but at the

semiconductor level, it's dozens of times smaller than a hair, right? Or maybe hundreds of times? Even if Sibyl's treasure lets us cheat our way to the abilities of an electron microscope, the work won't be that easy."

"That is true, but I do have an idea."

The Sage snapped her fingers and the sparks that burst out circled around above Boo Boo's head.

"Boo Boo, you are friends with the palm-sized Fairies, aren't you? Contact them immediately and ask for their help."

"Squeal? Are you going to have them make a potion?"

"The contents of a Shining Weapon are a collection of wires made from pure gold thinner than a hair. A normal human cannot hope to work with them and, as your friend there said, the sensory boost from Sibyl's treasure might not be enough to pull off the work. However. The Fairies are skilled at handicrafts. They can even weave a full ribbon dress out of Ground Spider silk, so they should not have difficulty working with something thinner than a hair. They may not like working with iron or silver, but they should not feel any revulsion toward gold."

With that said, the Sage laughed.

"Boo Boo, you are the only one who can contact those cautious Fairies. For that matter, you are also the only person who can contact the Sage who works behind the scenes of history. This is the power you built up with the path you walked. Feel free to use those trump cards here."

"But..."

Armeline traced her fingertip along her slender chin and thought deeply.

And as negative as it was, she opened her mouth. She had known it would come down to this from the beginning, so there was no point in acting smug about the knowledge after the fact.

"We have a strict time limit. I mean, we don't even have two days left. I'm fine with relying on the Fairies, but shouldn't we be working on some insurance in parallel, just to be sure?"

“I suppose I’ll ask. What exactly do you propose?”

“The Fairies aren’t the only ones who are skilled with their hands. There are a lot of different people gathered in the inn town. How about we rely on them? With the excitement of solving the Red problem, the people with nothing better to do might help us pretty readily.”

Also, it was humans who used the Magic represented by the Shining Weapons. It made the most sense to use human hands to solve this.

But the Sage shook her head.

“I won’t stop you if you go try that on your own, but I’m not going to help you with your wasted effort. I am only here now out of respect for your efforts in revealing the cause of the Redness and freeing the elder and the others from it. Do not expect unlimited and bottomless assistance from me.”

“Wasted effort...?”

“I have no issue with their technical skills and the manpower would be useful, but Beatrice is a Level Capper, which comes with its plusses and minuses. People will recognize her achievements when she is rising in the ranks, but once she starts to decline, they will focus only on the negative side and work against her. Ask for help and I doubt anyone will give it. In the worst case, they might pretend to help so they can poison her.”

“...But...”

Armeline had suggested the idea, but she fell silent.

The human inn town was ruled by the interests of organizations as much as by what individuals wanted. There were definitely nations and corporations that would benefit in the power balance if the striker of the Japanese government’s Detached Magic Palace was removed.

What would happen if her compromised state became widely known?

In the worst case, someone could even plan an attack on the leaf house where she slept. None of them wanted to think about the possibility of interference when the rescue attempt was a tightrope walk already.

Looking at it like that, it would indeed be more efficient to put together a

team of Ground's Nir Nonhumans who were tied by simple bonds of gratitude.

The Sage had seen a sickening amount of the desire that gathered around Magic, so she laughed scornfully before continuing.

"This isn't about whether or not it will actually happen. The inability to eliminate doubt would consume some of our work costs. I said we have no time, didn't I? I really don't think we can afford to bother with secret plots."

"..."

Armeline had no rebuttal, but she did not seem satisfied either.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo spoke up.

"So I need to ask the Fairies for help. But is that all I can do? Is there nothing else I can do?"

"Hm..." The Sage thought for a moment. "Even if it will be thinner than a hair, we will need a lot of pure gold to lay out the new wiring. Ground's Nir is a small enough island to walk the perimeter in only three days and the greedy humans use gears taken from the Labyrinth's Gimmicks as currency instead of gold. I don't know how much is buried on the island, but unlike Earth, where you can buy it by the gram at an exchange, it will likely be difficult to procure. Boo Boo, can you take care of that?"

Part 6

Beatrice might grow suspicious if she woke up and found he was not there.

He lacked the knowledge and the skill, but Boo Boo had to make up for that with what he could do. With so little time left, he could not just sit around without any ideas whatsoever.

When he left the Cave of Tears, the sun had already risen.

He parted ways with Filinon and Armelina who had to rest back on Earth and he hurried back to the leaf house partway up the mountain.

He grabbed some Full-Belly Apples and Filling Bananas he found growing on trees along the way and he found Beatrice outside the house with the blanket wrapped around her.

He had been too slow.

He was only a few seconds late, but he gently clenched his teeth at how worthless it made him feel.

“Good morning, Boo Boo. Where were you?”

“Squeal. I woke up hungry. So I went to gather some food for today.”

Boo Boo had always lived a life where half his day was spent procuring food. Even during an emergency like this, he still needed food and water to function. So this was a necessary thing, but a closer inspection would show that he mostly had fruits that grew on trees instead of animals that he had to hunt in an eat-or-be-eaten battle of wits.

He did not have time for that now.

Even the time spent procuring food felt wasted.

“What are you doing, Beatrice? If you woke up because you’re hungry, I’ll give you the biggest one.”

“...Girls need to take a bath on a daily basis. I can dig a hole by the river over there to produce a hot spring and use the river water to control the temperature, right?”

“Yes. You can go take a bath, Beatrice.”

“That dream was shattered when you showed up to stare at me like that.”

A fruit-only breakfast felt lacking to Boo Boo, but he had bigger things to worry about now. And he noticed that Beatrice seemed to enjoy the fruit a lot. That amount may have been about right for her.

“The letter, the letter...”

“?”

Beatrice watched in confusion as Boo Boo placed a thin piece of wood near the leaf house’s ceiling. He could barely write and the message was almost entirely communicated via illustration, but the palm-sized Fairies would read it when they showed up. The situation could hardly be worse, but the counterattack was beginning.

“Boo Boo. What are we going to do today?”

“Boo. Let’s go to the beach.”

He of course had a reason for this.

The two of them walked down the gentle slope of an unpaved mountain path. They discussed pointless things along the way: it would be neat to lay out mine cart rails along here, Ileana wouldn’t like that, and so on.

Once they left the forest and arrived on the beach, Boo Boo raised his voice without thinking.

“Ah! It was almost all washed away!!”

“Hm?”

Beatrice gave him a curious look and he frantically covered his mouth with both hands.

The rotting corpse of the Underworld’s giant marine creature should have been on the beach. He had gathered large seeds from there to reach the sky,

but there was almost no sign left of the black rotting flesh he had seen then. He doubted it had all been the work of the small lobsters and crabs cleaning up the beach, so the crashing waves must have grabbed them and swept them out to sea.

Beatrice brushed the hair off the side of her face and looked out to the sea that sparkled with the morning sun.

“This area has been cleaned up a lot, but it still doesn’t look like a great place to swim.”

“Squeal. It’ll have to be cleaned up bit by bit. The fish are an important food source too.”

With that, Boo Boo approached one hunk of rotting flesh that still remained on the beach.

He thought back to what the Sage had said in the Cave of Tears before dawn: *“There are always the mountains to the north. Sibyl’s treasure should be able to accurately locate any veins of gold, but we don’t have time to dig it out. ...The Underworld would be the better bet. The Underworld Lord forcibly reinforced that rotting marine creature to keep it alive. That means it must have had a mechanical side that included a lot of pure gold wiring. We need gold, but not a huge amount of it. It would probably be faster to gather some of that junk and extract it from there.”*

The beach cleaners could not eat hard things like this.

It would have been nice if nothing but a lot of strange machine parts had remained on the beach, but he was not that lucky. He stuck his hands into the black pile and felt around for anything that felt out of place. Something like thick cables, thin computer chips, or connectors made of heavy metal. He did not know what would be usable, so he pulled out everything that seemed artificial and gathered it all together.

“Oh, honestly! I can’t bear it any longer!!”

He heard a flapping sound.

“B-Boo Boo? There’s no one else here, right? It’s just you, right!?”

It was the sound of Beatrice removing the blanket she had wrapped around herself. The girl now only wore the one-piece underwear, but she seemed to be enjoying herself as she kicked at the crashing and receding waves.

She laughed like a child and spoke to him.

“Boo Boo! There are seabirds flying awfully close by. There might be a school of fish nearby. Maybe that’s thanks to the Underworld too!!”

“Then you can use this.”

Boo Boo held out something like a small-holed net. It was something he had pulled out of a black pile. It may have originally surrounded and supported some kind of giant internal organ, but its purpose was unclear.

Beatrice had said it did not look like a great place to swim, but she held the net in both hands and moved solidly into the water. The waves must have placed more resistance on her feet than she had expected because she pitched forward, tripped, and threw the net while soaking wet.

And just then...

“Boo Boo.”

“!”

Boo Boo’s shoulders jumped when he heard a female voice from directly behind him.

When could someone have approached him on the wide-open beach? While hiding behind one of the black piles so that the Holy Swordswoman could not see her, the Sage held her index finger to her lips and winked.

“...This would get complicated if Beatrice found me, so stay as you are.”

“Squeal.”

“You seem to have collected a fair amount. We should be able to extract all the pure gold we need from this. I will take care of the rest and you can let me handle the fire.”

“Thank you, Sage.”

Those words caused the Beatrice lookalike to briefly lose her calm.

Her eyes widened and then she formed a smile anew.

“No, thank you. I thought I would never again hear those words from an Iberian Orc. I also appreciate what you did for the elder and the others.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I will take this pile of junk away with me, but I do not want Beatrice to see me. Distract her and then find a good opportunity to take her away from the beach.”



“?”

“Simply put, I want you to play with Beatrice. Go on.”

The Sage pressed on his back and he was pushed out from behind the black pile with strength one would never expect based on her appearance.

Beatrice smiled at him while holding the net on the beach.

“Look, Boo Boo. There really is a school of fish gathered near the beach! This is going to be a big catch, so you chase them over to me from there. Hurry!!”

“Right.”

The term “big catch” reminded him of the day the village was attacked. That had been the day that Beatrice taught young Boo Boo how to fish and that had coincidentally saved him. If not for the attack, Beatrice may have been accepted by the villagers much sooner.

And to reiterate, procuring food was a constant requirement. The rules of nature cared not for your personal convenience and the icy fingertip of starvation and death would point at everyone the same.

If you had food, you did not have to worry.

And you could take the time usually spent on procuring food and spend it on something else.

“Squeal! Gather together, fish!!”

“Ah ha ha! Boo Boo, they’re escaping between your legs!!”

Part 7

A single gram of pure gold could be pounded out to more than 3 kilos. That of course meant the length of kilometers, not the weight of kilograms. Because it was soft, metal fatigue was not a concern like it was for steel and silver. It would not rust in the room temperature air and it would not be harmed by most chemicals other than aqua regia or an amalgamator.

After the Sage dissolved all the waste material and extracted just the pure gold, there was less than 10 grams in all. The world of semiconductors was a microscopic one, so that was hardly surprising.

However, the nature of gold worked in their favor.

It was not easily altered, so they did not have to worry about it being rendered useless and they could reuse the same gold to practice as many times as necessary before doing it for real.

“Rub-rub...”

A voice came from the Fairy village in the forest.

Palm-sized Meridiana was using her even smaller palms to apply pressure to the gold-glittering precious metal as if spinning it like a drill. Gold’s melting point was 1063 degrees Celsius, but it was already soft enough that there was no need to heat it.

With just one piece of gold thinner than a hair, it would blend into the background and even the small Fairies would lose sight of it if they were not careful. It caught the air like a wing, ignored gravity, and wandered aimlessly side to side in the air.

“Whoops.”

Her sister, Alice, grabbed the gold in her hands and wrapped it around her wrists. As the gold thread intersected like crisscrossing lines of sauce atop a

luxurious meal of white flesh fish, its shine grew. It gained a board-shaped thickness it had not had as a single thread. And while this was delicate metalwork, they could not let the thread break. It all had to be connected together like a one-stroke drawing.

This produced a ring large enough for a human finger.

The breathtaking product had both the shine of pure gold and the beauty of a translucent insect wing, but as Elder Morgan flew around and inspected the ring as it dangled from a tree branch with Ground Spider silk...

“It’s broken in some places.”

“Hweh!?”

“Don’t let it get you down, Alice. It isn’t entirely your fault. Look here. There was a lump when the gold thread was made. That makes it unusable. It needs an even thickness throughout.”

“U-uuuh!! Stop insulting Meridiana’s handiwork!!”

They of course had to redo it until they got it right.

And a single miraculous success was not good enough. They needed the reliable skill to repeat it thousands of times without a single mistake.

If the gold thread broke, the signal could not get through. If the thickness was not even, there would be a discrepancy in the electrical resistance and it could overheat or start a fire. Just like a sudden narrowing of a road would cause a traffic jam, the flow of electricity also required traffic control. The history of the semiconductors used in Shining Weapons was a competition to place as many “roads” and “traffic lights” as possible on a single chip to provide the greatest traffic control. Incidentally, a simple lighter made from a battery and aluminum foil took advantage of this by intentionally causing a traffic jam to start the fire.

The Fairies lived in the natural world and did not understand the detailed theories behind the semiconductors that controlled the flow of electricity to perform massive amounts of calculations, but they knew their skill was needed and being tested.

They threw the failed ring in a large coal pot over the fire to melt it down. Of

course, the pot was only large at their sense of scale, so it was only about the size of a can of food.

They did not have time to wait for it to cool naturally, so they tossed the melted lump into a bucket of water. With a unique steaming sound, lots of water vapor rose from the bucket. One large advantage of pure gold was that, unlike glass, it would not be damaged on the microscopic level even when exposed to extreme temperature differences.

They had repeated this countless times already.

They had been given this task because of their products made from weaving Ground Spider silk, but the pure gold changed shape far more easily than the thin but sturdy spider silk. If the thread breaking was the only issue, the work would only require extra care, but the even thickness seemed to get harder the more they focused on it. Just like with traditional craftsmen, getting a “feel” for it through repetition was more important than a simple theory.

“Meridiana, are your hands okay? You aren’t hurting them, are you?”

“I’m fine. More importantly, Alice, we need to stay focused. Once we get a feel for this, we’ll have made a major breakthrough. We can’t see them, but we’ve been stacking up the stones of progress. As long as we don’t let that stack collapse, we can do this. It has to be within reach now.”

“Uuh. If you say so, I guess I’ll work at it a little longer...”

In truth, the time spent waiting for the gold to melt and cool was far harder on their psyches than the time spent focusing on the work. It may have been like how you did not feel at all tired while leaning over your desk as you pulled an all-nighter, but as soon as you leaned back in your chair, you felt like you could never get back up again.

It was better to have no mountains or valleys.

Because there was a chance they could never crawl back up if they rolled down into a valley.

“Rub-rub-rub... Or is it more of a rub-rubbity-rub?”

So instead of just waiting, Meridiana continued practicing the drill-spinning

movement with her empty hands.

And her sister had a thought about that diligent behavior.

“...Meridiana, you look kind of like a Leftovers Rainbow Fly.”

“Alice!! You shouldn’t have said that!!!!!”

Part 8

The sun had set and night had arrived.

Beatrice had little time left since she had lost her Shining Weapon and could not return to Earth, but they could not perfectly fill their schedules with new tasks. Gathering materials, learning the proper techniques, and the other jobs took time to complete. And if they tried to do too much at once, they would only overwhelm themselves.

“So.”

After crawling from her ghost ship coffin, short but curvy Vampire Kallikantzaros spoke within the mangrove-filled southern forest.

“So the humans of the inn town are not going to act. Even after she saved their world.”

“Well, the problem itself is being kept quiet,” replied Fairy Queen Sutriona.

The silver-haired girl was little different from a human when she kept her power contained, so she had a bad habit of sneaking into the inn town and swiping human toys and snacks. She had simply expanded on her usual route to observe the humans.

Filinion or Armelina could have monitored the festive inn town, but they were human themselves. Sutriona was confident they would fight back if a battle did unfold, but there would be some “hope” contaminating their observations. They would subconsciously overlook some of the malice because they did not want to believe it was there. If anyone was going to observe the inn town while it healed the wounds of the Underworld battle, it had to be someone with an outside perspective. A third party was the most effective option.

“For the time being, I have not caught wind of an attack plan to directly target Beatrice while she is helpless. But some of the more informed are beginning to

realize no one can contact Beatrice on Earth or Ground's Nir ever since the Iberian Orc battle. Of course, they will initially assume she returned to Earth to rest after that major battle. But there is no sign of her back at the Detached Magic Palace she calls home and she is not enjoying the festival at the inn town. And no one would think she was working hard at exploring the Labyrinth so soon. ...Someone may put those rumors together and notice something is off."

Beatrice did have human acquaintances, but Filinion, Armelina, Wildefrau, Huldra, Gruagach, Rusalka, and any other humans that would be concerned for her had all fought on the front line in the battle against the elder.

If anyone was unaware what had happened at the end of that battle but was also persistently pursuing Beatrice's whereabouts, an unfriendly motive had to be assumed.

It was the same way the humans treated the Break News.

They did not investigate them because they liked them. They feared and hated them, so they could not rest easy until they had as much information as possible. And if they showed any weakness, it was time to deliver a finishing blow. It was a familiar state of affairs for Sutriona and Kallikantzaros.

The Vampire in a red negligee lightly brushed back her long blonde hair.

"For better or for worse, the actions of the Level Cappers stand out. How is the work going?"

"The real work begins tonight." Sutriona readily spoke words that carried great meaning. "There is still time left, but this will be the first and last chance. If it doesn't work, I doubt there will be time to come up with another idea. The failure would cause the thread of tension to snap, so I doubt we could expect top performance from them afterwards."

It was harder for a group to change plans than an individual.

Even if the Sage and Sibyl had a steely resolve, not everyone could keep up with their speed. And in a pressing situation where they had no spare personnel and every gear was necessary, they could not afford to lose a single person. The Sage and the others had stood at the peak for so long that it was unclear how they would handle a need to accommodate their *weakest link*.

So they had to succeed in this initial attempt when morale was high.

Beatrice's rescue hinged on whether or not they could accomplish this before losing the assumption that they only needed to look to the peak and do what that person said.

Whether or not they could fix the Shining Weapon rapier and save Beatrice depended on the skill of those performing the work.

But that was not what the Break News could do.

"It is fortunate this is happening at night. Especially so soon after the Iberian Orc incident so inconsiderately occurred during the day." In her night cap and negligee, Kallikantzaros stroked the gray pig doll in her arms and spoke expressionlessly. "So where will you place the *breakwater*? Since they only have one shot at this, you don't want anyone interfering with their work, do you?"

"Fighting the entire inn town won't be necessary. I said it was only some of the more informed that were catching on, didn't I? We can suppress this by ensuring that information is not spread to the rest of them. Let's head to the inn town. We can buy plenty of time by using the raucous partying to sneak up to each of those clever individuals and *give them a warning*."

Part 9

After making sure Beatrice was sound asleep in the leaf house, Boo Boo made his way to the coastal Cave of Tears. The ecosystem differed between day and night and he was afraid of ghosts, but he had to bear with it.

There was no reason to rush.

In fact, it was important to take their time to repair the rapier right.

“Squeal... Is everyone here?”

His searching voice was answered by something flying toward him from the depths of the bluish glowing cave. He caught it in his large hand to find it was a triangular flask containing a colorful bubbling liquid.

A busty young woman in glasses, White Witch Filinion, explained.

“I doubt you’re accustomed to pulling all-nighters, so use that energy drink. I couldn’t stand being told I couldn’t make one, so I had to prove her wrong.”

“What does that mean?”

“Um, an energy drink is, well...huh? It’s kind of hard to explain. It’s a strange drink that improves your brain efficiency with sugar and various nutrients, that uses artificial sweeteners, artificial flavoring, and carbonation to mask the flavor of the chemicals, and that really just lets caffeine do all the work.”

Doubt darkened Boo Boo’s face as the explanation continued.

It may have been the same as trying to describe the most popular carbonated drink to a Martian and making it sound more like a poison than anything: “It’s a dark, sweet, cold, and bubbly, it’s super popular yet no one really knows how to make it, and it’s strangely addictive.”

Next to the glasses girl, Armelina popped off the lid of an identical triangular flask and chugged the contents.

“It isn’t harmful, so drink up.”

“Okay.”

After having given her lengthy description, Filinion rubbed her forehead against the cave wall, but sometimes actions spoke louder than words.

Boo Boo copied Armelina’s actions to tilt his head back and drink the contents of the triangular flask and then he blinked his eyes.

“Khh... Wh-what is this...?”

“Oh, she took advantage of being in another world when she Mixed it, so it might be a bit much for a beginner. Japan’s safety standards would never let you cram that much caffeine into a single drink.”

“Please stop implying I simply threw a bunch of caffeine into some sugar water. The perfect distribution just so happened to include a lot of it and I didn’t mention all the effort that went into the recipe because I wanted to maintain my image as a cool mature woman, but this really is something only a strongest Level Capper healer could have made. Besides, this is far better than those imported drinks that might as well be mild poisons!! I can’t believe you!!”

“You’re the one that said the caffeine does all the work.”

Those two continued arguing as they walked deeper into the Cave of Tears where they found the preparations well underway. The Sage, Sibyl, Meridiana, and Alice were all present. Beatrice’s broken rapier and its blade were lying on the ground and everyone stood in a circle around them. They had all brought their own “weapons”. The Sage drew her patchwork rapier, Sibyl put on the triple-jeweled circlet, and the palm-sized Fairies held pure gold in their hands.

The Sage turned toward the new arrivals.

“...Perfect timing. How about we get started?”

“What should we do?”

“The White Witch will keep this area clean from a sterilization and disinfection standpoint. The Fighter Priest will use a large obstacle to adjust the flow of air in the cave to adjust the temperature and humidity. Together, you should be able to construct a clean room for handling semiconductors.”

The Sage had mastered all Magic of all Elements, so she could do anything that Filinion or Armelina could. She did not because she had to focus on extracting and recovering the data on Beatrice's broken rapier.

Also...

"Boo Boo, you can be our record keeper. Beatrice's survival hinges on her ability to Sign Out and safely return to Earth. She can easily repair her Shining Weapon or get a new one once back on Earth, but I want to provide as much support as possible just in case. Learn all of the steps here so we are prepared in case something happens at a later date. If something does go wrong, you would be the first to notice since you are always by her side."

It was not over once they rescued her.

So that she could keep going, they wanted to be prepared enough that they could easily handle the same situation again.

If she repaired her Shining Weapon and kept using it, they would have to monitor it afterwards. If she replaced it with a new one, it could always be destroyed in the same way again. If something had happened once, it could always happen again.

Human and Iberian Orc intelligence and brain capacity were fundamentally different. With the full use of his supercomputer-level brain, he would be able to respond to this situation on his own, even if he could not find the Sage or the Fairies. Creating that kind of insurance and leaving a possibility for the future removed some of the psychological pressure from Sibyl, Meridiana, and the others participating this time. It seemed like a simple thing, but it meant a lot. Just like with a tightrope walk, the greater the height and the more important the moment, the less of your normal skill you could draw out. Telling yourself to relax was not enough to actually relax. Including a *guaranteed effect* was like having a trump card.

Boo Boo understood that.

He did, but he still gently clenched his fists at not being any immediate use. He just wished his knowledge and skills could do something – anything – on the front line here. Armelina lightly elbowed him while changing her metal staff into a giant box and placing it in the cave passageway with a thud.

“I’ve captured the flow of air. I’ll alter the design to preserve the current stagnation and store air in the work area.”

“I’ve begun distribution as well. Sterilization and disinfection will take effect in 4, 3, 2, 1. Currently cleaning. Sterilization is holding at greater than 99.9%. You can begin at any time.”

The air seemed to cool down all of a sudden.

The Sage placed her patchwork rapier on the ground and reached for Beatrice’s rapier lying parallel to it. She removed a few special screws that looked like snow crystals, opened the cushioning that was shaped something like a crab shell, and revealed a few thin plastic panels within. The ends were discolored and melted with exposed gold wiring in places. It was tricky work, but the Sage’s fingertips moved with perfect precision. This task would require the same delicacy as defusing a bomb.

“...Found it. Sibyl.”

“Yes. I am *looking*.”

The Royal Elf replied with a calm voice, but she had already shut her eyelids which were decorated with thin eyelashes. The three jewels in her circlet could be seen glowing palely in the darkness. She was likely revealing a different circuit diagram from what was simply on the surface.

“Fairies, to ensure mutual understanding, I will use the numbers derived from the circuit diagram on the cave walls: Focus on #3 and #8 and on #12 and #19. Connect those with gold thread without allowing it to touch anything else.”

“Alice.”

“I’m on it!”

Meridiana produced gold thread thinner than a hair and Alice followed Sibyl’s instructions to connect the damaged wiring sticking out from the breaks in the circuit boards. In semiconductor factories, the wiring was printed using something like a sewing machine, but Alice’s arms rivaled that in speed.

If the miniscule threads touched anything other than the terminal points in the air, it could cause a short and damage further data, but there was no

hesitation in the movement of Alice's fingers. She repaired the broken circuits by bridging the gaps according to Sibyl's instructions.

There was nothing the Sage could do until the hardware was complete.

She would occasionally use a cotton swab to wipe sweat from the Fairies' brows, but before too long, Sybil opened her eyes.

She looked to her companion and spoke.

"The preparations are complete, Sage. It is your turn now."

"Understood."

With the wiring complete, the Fairies used their clear bug wings to flutter away as the Sage's fingers traced across the patchwork rapier lying on the ground. Immediately, several rectangular frames appeared in the darkness.

During the Underworld battle, she had remotely accessed Beatrice and the others' Shining Weapons without a wired connection in order to view the Screenshot photographs contained inside. The Holy Swordswoman had used a cable when connecting to Abyss, but the Sage had no such requirement.

She could access the data with a wireless connection.

If she could access it, she could boot up Beatrice's broken rapier.

Alice tilted her head while viewing the strings of alphanumeric text scrolling rapidly through the rectangular frames.

"Hmm? So is it working?"

"Alice."

Her sister, Meridiana, placed a hand on her shoulder to pull her back.

At the same moment, the Sage's eyebrows trembled slightly.

"...*What is this?*"

That might have been the expected response from a normal person.

But this did not bode well.

A question from the Sage's mouth and a situation she had not expected were enough to predict the beginning of a catastrophe.

The alphanumeric text scrolling across the frames was unfamiliar to Boo Boo, Meridiana, and the others from Ground's Nir. No, it may have been just as incomprehensible to Filinon and Armelina from Earth. But Boo Boo noticed something odd as he viewed it. These were definitely strings of alphanumeric text, but there were some areas that only contained dots. And the amount of non-numeric and non-alphabetic characters was increasing. There were meaningless gaps in the scrolling data.

The Sage clearly clicked her tongue.

There had been an unspoken understanding among them.

They only had one shot at this.

If they did not succeed while morale was high, it would break them and they could never recover.

Part 10

The Sage had said they would try everything available to them.

But that implicitly said she did not know how to recover the lost data.

They left the Cave of Tears without coming to any definitive conclusions.

Could they save Beatrice or not?

They had no guarantee.

“ ... ”

“I-it’ll be okay, Boo Boo.”

Late at night, Filinion spoke gently to Boo Boo who was silently trudging back home below the cloudy sky.

“We’re not out of time yet. We have a whole day left, so we have plenty of chances to turn this around. So it’ll be okay. Please don’t let it get you down.”

“Right...”

He wanted to believe her.

Letting his negative thoughts trap him would be meaningless. It worried him endlessly that they had no actual plan. He knew that, but he could not stop the bad feeling growing inside him. He could tell he was being swallowed up by a large but invisible current. He sensed a coming loss. His spine tingled with that familiar sense that reminded him of when so much had been taken from him or destroyed.

His head felt heavy.

He felt a weight in his stomach.

His tear ducts threatened to loosen if he let his guard down. He wanted to yell at the top of his lungs and just run around aimlessly.

“The one thing we know is that we can’t fix this by doing nothing,” said Armelina. “This isn’t the time to feel down, Boo Boo. We need to pull ourselves together even more than before. We’re going to save Beatrice, right? So we don’t have time for shock. We can’t waste any time with the limit approaching.”

Yes.

That was right.

No matter what happened, the limit would approach all the same. If they did not want to simply wait for the coming disaster, they had to keep struggling no matter the situation.

They were not fighting because they knew they could win. The burden on their shoulders was not so light that they could give up just because they were losing.

They had to count themselves lucky for learning this so early on. They had to force themselves onto the next plan.

They had not been faced with this information at the last second. They still had a day. Even if the end was guaranteed to arrive if they did nothing, they still had a whole day to work with. So it would be okay. Beatrice was not going to disappear immediately. If he returned to his leaf house, he would find Beatrice sleeping peacefully there. There was a definite existence there.

So.

So.

So.

“...I’ll head home. Squeal, I need to refocus myself.”

“That’s right. We still have tomorrow, so we don’t need to waste that opportunity.”

“Ha ha. Seeing Beatrice’s face will rid you of your worries. When you’re afraid of some formless anxiety, nothing calms you like something with a definite form.”

The three of them discussed that on the way up the mountain to the leaf house. Boo Boo gradually regained his smile along the way.

“Then...then we still have a chance. Beatrice will still be okay. Squeal, I hope she gets better soon. I want to play with her. I’ll show her how good I’ve gotten at fishing!”

They were too naïve.

Beatrice was collapsed on the ground as if she had tried to drag herself out of the leaf house.

Her limbs were convulsing slightly as she suffocated on the blood she had coughed up.

Part 11

The next thing he knew, the sun was in the sky.

Boo Boo could no longer remember what had happened in the meantime.

“Hey, what’s going on!? Can damage to the autonomic nerves really do this much!? She didn’t bite her tongue, did she? Beatrice, open your mouth. Hurry up and open it, you idiot!!”

“If she’s coughing up blood, does that mean she has internal bleeding? Did irregular movement of her diaphragm harm her lungs? No, is it a stress ulcer? Armelina, out of the way. I know what Recovery Potion she needs, so hold her jaw and keep her windpipe clear until I’m finished administering it! Just don’t let her suffocate!!”

Some fragmentary memories remained, but he was only really knew that he was glad Filinion and Armelina had been with him. He could not have done anything on his own. Without Filinion's Recovery Potion and Armelina's first-aid skills, Beatrice might have lost her life right there.

Why hadn't he considered it?

If he left Beatrice on her own, who would look after her if her condition worsened? She could not rely on Abyss who could not move. If Boo Boo had been with her...or if he had asked Ileana, Wildefrau, or someone else to help, they could have prevented it from getting this bad in the first place.

“Uyuh...”

It had only been a small hurdle that anyone could have cleared.

But foolish Boo Boo had not even considered it. He had been too naïve. He had not taken the threat seriously.

"Owwwaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Abbbbbb

He hated it.

He hated his own hopeless ignorance.

It felt like the result of living such a carefree life. It was his punishment for wasting so much time and learning nothing. But if so, why wasn't the punishment directed at him? It was always like this for him. Only he survived while everyone he cared for collapsed around him.

Why was the world like this?

It was like unrelated people were sent to hell so that he would suffer.

Deep in the forest, he shoved his forehead against a large boulder and shed large tears. It was not the time for this. They had less than a day left, so the time limit really was approaching. He knew that, but there was nothing else he could do.

Then he heard the rustling of underbrush from behind him.

"You sure are making a racket this morning, Boo Boo. Well, I suppose that girl must be satisfied if you care for her this much."

"...Sage?"

"Anyone on the island could find you after you yelled like that. I've more or less figured everything out, so I'll give you a report."

That person who looked so much like Beatrice sat on a nearby stump and snapped her fingers. Sparks scattered like her fingers were made of flint and a rectangular frame of red light appeared in the air.

"After extracting the data from Beatrice's Shining Weapon, I found that too much is damaged to recover it as-is. I told you that much in the cave last night."

"Is there...is there some other way of saving Beatrice? If so, please tell me! I'll do anything!!"

This was not the time for crying.

He did not care if it made him stupid or foolish. If there was anything he could learn, he would do so. He approached the Sage as if grabbing at her, but she only calmly shook her head.

“No. Repairing the Shining Weapon’s personal authentication section is the only way to return Beatrice to Earth and save her.”

“Then...?”

“We will have to change our repair method. I had wanted to predict the contents of the blanks using the files immediately preceding and following them, but entire blocks are missing and that isn’t feasible.” The Sage raised a slender index finger covered in jointed metal. “Beatrice’s Shining Weapon has entire blocks of data missing, so we have to find a way to fill those gaps. Since we can’t rely on the surrounding data, we will need a different hint.”

“What is it? Is this leading in a good direction or a bad direction? Just tell me that up front!”

“That’s hard to say. There are a few different formats for a Shining Weapon’s contents, but Beatrice uses a customized version of a commercial model. That means it will be structured similar to the ones used by other people.”

The Sage opened a new frame and placed it behind the one filled with holes. That filled the holes in from behind.

“We compare Beatrice’s worm-eaten data with someone else’s full set of data and then fill in what is missing. That should let us easily repair the full blocks of missing data.”

“Th-then we can save Beatrice, right!? I don’t have to worry about anything, right!?”

“However.”

The Sage cut him off.

The word filled his chest with an ominous feeling.

“...This would require samples from more than just five or ten people. We would need to gather as many samples as possible to average them out and dilute them down into plain and average data that is something like an artificial organ that is compatible with anyone. Yes, my guess is it would take the Shining Weapons of more than 1000 people. Just getting help from her friends will not be enough here.”

“.....

Boo Boo silently stared in a certain direction.

He did not need to check the map. He looked to the partially-repaired inn town where the humans gathered. It was a symbol of peace where celebrations continued now that the Red menace was gone.

With no knowledge or skills, that was the only candidate Boo Boo could think of.

“Boo Boo, that would not be easy.”

“But...”

“This isn’t about what they think of Beatrice.”

The Sage must have predicted several things from the moment she had seen the new repair method, so she rejected his idea.

“As you can see from her state, Shining Weapons are the strongest weapon and final lifeline of the humans visiting this world. Lose it, and they will slowly die, no matter how high their Level. No one will just lend you theirs if you ask. Giving you their Shining Weapon is like leaving their life in your hands.”

Yet they needed to see 1000 people’s Shining Weapons. And only the inn town had that many humans.

...If he could not expect their cooperation, what else could he do?

Could he only sit around and wait for Beatrice to die? Could she not rely on anyone for help as she crawled along the ground and coughed up blood, even though a method had already been proposed?

“I will go to Earth,” said the Sage. “The corporations leisurely awaiting results on Earth may be more lax than the Level Cappers who feel at home on the front lines of this world and view their Shining Weapon as their partner. Since I don’t have time to make a gradual approach while applying pressure, it will require a fairly reckless cyber-attack, but if it succeeds, I might be able to steal enough plans directly from the manufacturer’s servers.”

If it succeeds.

Might.

...Not even the Sage could guarantee results. For the arrogant Sage, it was quite timid to consider the possibility that things would not go as planned.

Boo Boo had seen Beatrice coughing up blood on the ground.

He had to consider the possibility that it would not work.

“Boo Boo, I would like to make a suggestion. I wanted to leave this as a last resort, but we really are reaching that point. You know Wildefrau, that Water Element expert, right? I’ll take my time on Earth to make sure I succeed, so there is something I want you to do here.”

“?”

“You can set up some *definite insurance* for Beatrice.”

Part 12

He was unsteady on his feet.

Boo Boo had failed to meet the basic requirement of procuring food, so he staggered back to the leaf house while holding his stomach which still did not feel any hunger.

It was not enough. That was all he could think about: it was not enough.

So he should have celebrated the reply the Sage had given him. It had made up for what Boo Boo lacked.

The White Queen Filinon and Fighter Priest Armelina were gathered around the campfire doing something.

“Hey, glasses girl. Is this really edible? It looks like a giant booger.”

“How dare you challenge my knowledge of the human body. And it’s not a booger!! It’s just that including only the necessary nutrients isn’t very satisfying, so just like with diet foods, I made it swell out in your stomach so you feel full. And the chocolate, yogurt, and strawberry flavors have my seal of approval. All that’s missing is the patent submission.”

“Ehh? For this giant booger solidified at the bottom of a pot?”

“Fine, let’s take this out back!! Must you ruin all of my efforts because your poor body development makes you view everything in a negative light!?”

As the glasses girl got all heated up, the police officer sighed, raised the wooden spatula she was using to stir the pot on the fire, and whacked the White Witch lightly on the forehead. Filinon screamed and rolled around on the ground.

“...Squeal. What are you doing?”

“Oh. I asked Filinon for some breakfast and she gave me this mystery space

food, so we're discussing what to do with it."

"I'm pretty sure your reaction was overkill just now! That went far beyond channeling a domineering husband who overturns the tea table! Right!?"

The tearful glasses girl had not learned her lesson, so the police officer treated her to another spatula hit. An infinite loop was setting in, but Boo Boo entered the leaf house because he did not have time to watch.

Beatrice was lying peacefully within.

Who appeared in worse shape: her or Abyss lying deactivated next to her?

"Boo...Boo..."

"Beatrice."

He slowly bent his legs and sat by her pillow, intentionally suppressed the powerful emotion in his throat, and spoke in short sentences.

"It will be okay. We found a way to save you. So it will be okay. This time...this time for real. We really will save you."

"..."

"There's nothing to worry about. The pain and suffering will be gone soon. This time tomorrow, you'll be running around just fine. So rest easy and get to sleep. Everything will be solved when you wake up..."

She was lying on the floor in only underwear and a blanket and she looked up at him with half-lidded eyes.

She breathed in and out and spoke in a scratchy voice.

"Did the Sage say something to you, Boo Boo?"

"..."

"That's it. I'm going to punch her for putting that look on your face..."

"No, Beatrice!!"

The Holy Swordswoman seriously tried to get up, so he quickly kept her on the ground. The difference between human and Iberian Orc strength did not matter here. Beatrice was so weak he was afraid just touching her would break

her.

After being almost forcibly knocked down, Beatrice looked up at Boo Boo's face.

"You say it'll be over if I go to sleep. So did she bring up Wildefrau?"

"..."

"I'm guessing the Sage suggested cold sleep. Well, it makes sense as a form of insurance in case you can't solve this within the time limit. With years or even decades to work, you're sure to find several solutions..."

"Beatrice..."

"I'm sorry, Boo Boo. But I won't use that method."

"But...but! You can't just reject it because it was the Sage's idea! If we have something we know will work, then...!!"

"I've already rejected a form of insurance that is guaranteed to work, Boo Boo. It wasn't cold sleep, though." Beatrice smiled thinly. "Hey, Boo Boo. Cold sleep comes with its own risks. I assume the Sage explained those to you."

"Uuh..."

"Yes, that's the reason for the sad look in your eyes. ...I want to punch her so bad."

"But...even so, I want to save you..."

The girl sighed.

She could barely move, but she released an oddly warm breath as she got to the crux of the issue.

"Even if it means remaking me so that you are my greatest enemy?"

A large tremor ran through his body.

He was unable to move for a while.

"Cold sleep sounds nice, but it requires a lot of adjustments. It's a delicate process where the slightest mistake would cost me my life." Beatrice looked this precious person in the eye. "And even if you can prepare my body so I will

survive, what about the other life forms? I bet my germs, gut flora, and immune system would be wiped out and reset. Once I woke up from my long sleep, I wouldn't be able to live in a normal environment. I wouldn't be able to touch you since you live in the forest. My immune system might recover after spending a long time on Earth, but it also might never recover."

"..."

"Ah ha ha. Is it confusing to talk about things that are too small to see? Regardless, I will not accept that. I feel chills at the mere thought of remaking myself so you're a deadly enemy. I don't know what the Sage told you with that thin smile on her face, but that isn't a gamble I'm willing to make."

Boo Boo had been told all that.

It would not happen tomorrow or the day after that. That risk would occur if it took them years or decades to find a solution.

"...But."

Of course he was afraid.

He was no longer alone. But that red-and-silver-haired girl had always been pulling on his hand at the center of that circle of people. The thought of losing Beatrice was even more painful than having his heart torn to shreds. But being something that would kill her would also make him sad.

"But I still want you to live."

"If you can't be with the person you love, you can't really call it living."

"I just want you to be happy, no matter what form that takes...!!"

"If you really think that would be a happy fate, then you've let the Sage influence you. Maybe you need a harsh lecture..."

"It might not be possible to solve this without losing anything. It might be necessary to give up something!!"

The slender girl was unfazed by the monster's shouting.

In fact, she narrowed her eyes like a mother watching her child throw a tantrum.

“Listen, Boo Boo. The memories of our time together aren’t yours alone.”

“...”

“If I have to give up something, then my life is of secondary importance. I will protect the time we spent together and the bonds we built. I will protect them and die. I don’t care if it’s the Sage or you; I will not let anyone take away the right to be with the person I love... That is my dignity and my pride. I will never distort the Beatrice you took such good care of. If I had to view you with fear, then I wouldn’t be me anymore...”

Then what were they supposed to do?

Was there any way to extend the time limit without the cold sleep trick?

“Let’s do what we can.”

“Beatrice...”

“Let’s fight as hard as we can and accept the result. Let’s settle this fair and square. Whether it succeeds or fails. I will remain true to myself to the end, so don’t worry, Boo Boo. I won’t go anywhere.”

Persuading her with words was simply not happening.

She would never agree to give up on her current life and go elsewhere.

“Uuh.”

His vision blurred.

Crying in front of that suffering girl would only worry her more. It was like telling her he had given up before even trying. But no matter how tightly he clenched his teeth, he could not remain calm.

He was such a fool.

He was so stupid, stupid, stupid and he could not forgive himself for letting this happen.

Was he really so dumb that he did not realize he needed to learn as much as possible in the limited time remaining in the hopes of finding more cards to play?

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuh...!!”

“Ha ha. There’s no way I could leave behind a crybaby like you, Boo Boo...”

All the while, time was passing.

The true sun was already at its peak, indicating that half of the day had gone by.

Part 13

Boo Boo stood atop a hill.

The humans who had come from the distant Earth had built up the inn town as a base for their Labyrinth exploration. Some scars remained from the Underworld battle, but it was still the most active part of the island.

Many humans were gathered there, which in turn meant many Shining Weapons.

Everything needed to save Beatrice would be there.

“...”

But as he stood there, a dry sound reached his ears.

A skeleton in a cowboy hat had walked up. It was Skull Wave who gathered the remains of the many people who had lost their lives in this world.

“You aren’t considering a very bad idea, are you?”

“Boo. ...Hey, Skull Wave.” Boo Boo continued staring into the distance. “How does it feel to die?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I’m really just an emulation of a dead person’s personality. I was constructed after death, but I haven’t actually passed the point of death myself. And if secondhand information is good enough, you could get it from anyone.”

“...”

“Were you going to accept her fate if I said it wasn’t that bad? To be clear, that’s not the real issue here. Boo Boo, this is your life. Instead of thinking about the person facing death, you should think about how you’ll feel being left behind.”

“Beatrice says she would rather die than live on without me.”

“She’s a strong girl. And you aren’t helping matters there, but that’s not what anyone was talking about.” The skeleton put his hands on his fleshless and skinless hips. “Listen, the Underworld is no more. That means I control all the humans who died in Ground’s Nir.”

“...?”

“I’m not saying I’ll create an emulation of Beatrice’s personality. Look at it more simply. If she dies, her body will turn to bone and become a part of me. She’ll be drawn to me and be known as Skull Wave. Would you be able to bear that?”

Boo Boo said nothing.

But a clear pressure emanated from his giant body and that seemed to satisfy the cowboy hat skeleton.

“...So you do understand.”

“S-squeal? What do you mean?”

“You don’t want anything to take Beatrice from you, right? Even if that’s fate and it can’t be helped, you just can’t accept it, can you? You managed to recover after your village was attacked and your entire family was killed, but this alone you can’t bear. Even when you feel like having things taken from you is inevitable, there is a definite threshold when it’s just too much. So that feeling is real. And what in this world is more powerful than that? Even if the god in heaven has decreed it and even if she’s given up on herself, why do you have to stand aside in the life you were given? Be honest with yourself. Be honest and you’ll know what it is you have to do.”

It was a dark feeling.

It was muddy and unpleasant.

To eat and to live.

Boo Boo had rejected violence for any other purpose, so this feeling never should have existed in his heart.

“To hell with that,” said Skull Wave. “What’s wrong with this?”

The monster trembled in fear, thinking this was a result of the exhaustion that

came rushing back now that he felt cornered, but Skull Wave laughed.

He held the cowboy hat down with one hand and said it clearly.

“What could be wrong with a man falling in love with a woman?”

Time stopped.

The confusing thing boiling inside him had been named and categorized, so he could finally begin processing it accordingly. Unable to bear the uncomfortable silence, the feeling raged around Boo Boo’s entire body but had no outlet.

That was how love worked.

If you could control the feeling, it would never be called love in the first place.

“Good and bad and all those concerns don’t matter,” said the being who existed beyond death. “It doesn’t matter if you’re stupid, foolish, or lacking. As long as you have *that* inside you, you’re standing at the top of the world. You’re a winner. Even if someone else tries to deny it, nothing was wasted on the way to gaining *that*. Not one thing. After all, there’s no set path to reach it. Everyone has their own path and they’re all the most perfect answer for that person.”

“...”

I don’t get it. I don’t get it. I don’t understand.

Just a few seconds earlier, Boo Boo might have responded like that. Just as he had countless times before during his aimless days.

But that had changed.

He was no longer falling behind. He stood on the front line of the world.

“Are you afraid of losing her? Do you want to run wild when you even imagine the moment she’s taken from you? Then think about what it is you really need to do. I’m not talking about a haphazard rampage or emotional resignation. Everyone knows men are willing to throw away their own lives for love. So set aside what’s possible and impossible, line up all the cards you have, and think about what you can do for the person you love.”

“...”

“I’m not talking about figuring out which card to choose. Have you divided

them between those you can choose and those you can't? Then you already know some cards you couldn't choose. If you could have helped with her suffering but you pulled back your hand before even trying because the walls of reality got in the way, you'll never forgive yourself. Now, let's shuffle them all together again. Let's lay them all out and view them all. ...What will you choose? Whatever you reached for now that you're feeling that anger is what you really want to do."

Boo Boo sniffled his nose.

He rubbed his eyes and looked to the human-filled inn town once more.

"Have you found what you really, truly want to do?"

"Yes. Beatrice said to do what we can, but I know that isn't the right answer. It wouldn't satisfy anyone."

He no longer had the look of a lost child.

The light in his eyes did not waver.

"...*I'll try doing what I can't do.* That has to be my right answer."

Part 14

A low tremor ran through the ground.

The people looked around in confusion and then spotted the abnormality.

“Boo...”

It was a pig-faced giant who stood nearly four meters tall. The gray Iberian Orc with incredibly powerful muscles was walking straight toward the inn town.

The inn town acted as the humans’ base, but it was not surrounded by tall walls. There were exceptions like the Break News, but the humans trusted the firepower of their Magic enough to forego a wall. Instead of defending with shields, they eliminated threats with their weapons. That was the general policy concerning Nonhumans for the people who used and protected the inn town.

And that Iberian Orc was not just a wild beast. You could say he had a criminal record. Even if he had been fighting to save Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina from Elkiad’s fierce attack, he had not been given a chance to explain the circumstances.

At the time, Fairy Queen Sutriona had used her disaster-level power to leave the result unclear, but if he went out of his way to pick at that old wound, the humans would have little trouble piecing the memories back together.

The festive mood vanished almost instantly.

The town was still scarred by the Underworld battle and a panic filled it like someone had poked a hornet’s nest.

“Stop! Stop right there!!”

“Trying to convince him is useless. Shouting will only get him worked up. Shield unit, to the front!! Once you stop him, we’ll fire. Just follow your training. And if it comes to it, we can always use Recovery Magic as long as you don’t die!!”

“That’s the Dragon Eater. He can move a lot faster than you would think. Do not let your guard down and always keep him in your sights. Don’t forget to use Curse homing!!”

He had yet to enter the inn town.

He had not done anything, but so many Shining Weapons were already aimed at him.

Shining Weapons.

He needed as many of those as possible to protect someone he cared for.

“I want to save Beatrice...”

How much courage had it taken to force out those words?

He had always kept his distance even during the festivals that had looked like so much fun, but he had broken his own policy to approach these strangers and bow his head. Just how madly had that choice made his heart pound in his chest?

“Please help me!! It doesn’t have to be for long, but I need to see your Shining Weapons. That’s all I need to save someone important to me!!”

Naturally, there was no response.

Several lightning-like flashes of light approached from dead ahead. This was warning Magic that had no destructive power behind it. The intense light was only meant to blind the target and the real attack would come from the fully-equipped knights who held shields so large they could hide their entire body behind it.

The shield unit charged forward in a row to form a single wall.

They used the slight time available to approach their target.

Of course, blinding an Iberian Orc was not enough to stop him from fighting. With his ears and nose, he had plenty of other senses to use. If he swung around the thick Shining Weapon hanging from his hip, he could take out all of the approaching knights in a single blow.

But he did not.

He suppressed the fear and clenched his teeth while allowing the several large shields to charge straight toward him.

He ignored them and raised his voice.

“I was told how important Shining Weapons are for humans!! I was told giving them to someone is like giving that person your life. I was told no one would lend theirs to me if I asked!! So I won’t just ask. I’ll risk my life to earn your trust! I’ll show you it’s safe to let me see them and that I won’t take your lives!! So-...!!”

His words were cut off early.

Even large shields could be used for fierce attacks if the wielder hit the target with the corner. But the shield unit was only meant to hold him in place.

The real attack was a barrage from behind them.

With an explosive boom, a giant ball of flames slammed into Boo Boo between the eyes. Even the powerful muscles of an Iberian Orc could only do so much if he did not dodge at all. His head wobbled. He desperately tried to hold onto his consciousness and blood flowing from his split forehead covered his right eye.

He had lost half his field of vision, but he still shouted.

“Help her. Please help Beatrice!!!!!!”

A second and third attack mercilessly flew his way.

The shield unit gathered around him was blown away in some friendly fire as the major Magic techniques continually shook Boo Boo’s giant body. His thick skin was torn away and his blood sprayed out.

...Fighting and stealing the Shining Weapons may have been an option.

But Boo Boo had not chosen that route. Even if all those sacrifices saved Beatrice, she still had a life to live afterwards. He could not let her future be crushed by grudges and regret.

Beatrice had said her life was of secondary importance.

Boo Boo felt the same.

If he could give her a bright future, he was willing to sacrifice his own life.

“...Your...Shining...Weapons...”

The explosive roars continued on and on.

More and more major attacks were fired at him, the firing squad began to breathe heavily from the psychological burden, a rusty flavor spread through his mouth, and yet Boo Boo still got the words out.

“Lend me your Shining Weapons...just for a little while. I swear...I will bring them...back...”

There was a tremor.

He had finally reached his limit.

“...Save...”

His words trailed off.

The monster’s giant body toppled forward.

“...Beatri...”

Meanwhile, the palm-sized Fairy Meridiana grew pale and shouted while she watched from afar.

“L-Lady Sutriona!! Boo Boo is...hurry...do something...ahh...you only have to distract...just draw the humans attention elsewhere!!”

“Wait.” The Break News spoke that one word with an exasperated sigh. “While I do need to punch that bony bastard later, this is the obstacle Boo Boo set up for himself. So he has to overcome it himself. Reach out a helping hand here and it will only cause his heart to rot.”

“This isn’t about that psychological stuff!! None of that matters if he’s killed right here and now!!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Sutriona was right.

After the gray monster collapsed face down, the person who had fired that final shot actually looked confused while wiping sweat from their chin. The

inexperienced rookies were celebrating, but the veteran Level Cappers could tell something was not right. If he was that tough, he could have charged straight through their barrage and reached them. Each of their powerful attacks took time to activate, so they were done for if he got close. And yet he had stayed in one place. He had wasted his opportunity. He had never drawn the Shining Weapon at his hip and he had continued rambling. It was said a drowning man would grasp at straws, but did this monster not have that biological instinct? It should not have been possible to not draw your weapon when faced with certain death, so everyone who had seen that impossible courage felt a tremor run down their spine, like they had seen someone commit suicide in only the water in a wash basin.

No one delivered a finishing blow.

It would be hard to find a part of him that was not wet with blood. They could not even tell if he was still breathing. But for some reason, no one approached even after he had collapsed defenseless onto the ground. No one thought about discarding his corpse in some more distant location. It was a small island, but the rules of survival of the fittest still applied outside the inn town. Since this animal could no longer stand under his own power, did they assume some other beast would take care of the cleanup for them?

No.

Perhaps they simply did not want to end it.

Perhaps they wanted to see what would happen next.

“ ... ”

One of the people who had formed the impromptu shield unit remained in place without speaking a word.

He was a man known as the Pure Knight.

He stood there a while staring at the bloody beast.

“What’s with you? It’s over, ain’t it?”

“Let’s get back and get drunk again.”

Even when some others wielding large shields called out to him, the Pure

Knight did not move. He was of much lower rank. Even after a frank comment from someone with a clear position in the hierarchy, he ignored them and stayed put. He felt a slight prickle of guilt.

This monster had been faced by such hostility.

The Pure Knight wondered what the monster had been trying to accomplish. Unless it was a diversion of some kind, there was no good reason to suicidally take it all head on. And even if it had been a diversion, there would have been no reason not to use the Shining Weapon at his hip.

Could there really have been nothing more to it?

He had said he wanted to borrow everyone's Shining Weapons to rescue Beatrice.

That made no sense whatsoever, but was that really all there was to it?

"What is it? Looking for some way to profit from this? Or do you want his head as a trophy?"

"This damn pig is wearing a Shining Weapon like he thinks he's human. Heh heh heh. I wonder how many gears I'd get if I sold that thing at the pawn shop."

There was a loud sound of metal on metal. Not even the Pure Knight knew why he had punched his friend in the face.

Part 15

“Boo Boo.”

The Iberian Orc slowly opened his eyes when he heard his name.

His surroundings had already grown dark.

And with the unchanged moon behind her, Vampire Kallikantzaros peered down at his face with her short but curvy body dressed in a red negligee and night cap.

“...What a shame. If you had taken just a little longer to wake, I would have had an excuse to sink my fangs into you.”

It was unclear how serious she was about that.

For some reason, the small girl was seated on a simple cart made of wood.

When injured Boo Boo sat up, he realized he was in the location of the previous conflict.

And there was something odd there: swords, spears, axes, bows, clubs, hammers, whips, staffs, and shields.

All the different weapons and armor that humans used formed a pile larger than Boo Boo himself.

They were Shining Weapons.

Those were the control devices for the technological system known as Magic. Leaving these with someone in this foreign world should have been the same as leaving your life in their hands.

“Why are these here...?”

“I do not know what happened during the day,” said the blonde girl in a red negligee who sat on the cart presumably prepared to transport the Shining Weapons. “But it seems Demon Lord Tselika did something behind the scenes.

That toxic woman is apparently worshiped like a god by a portion of a group on their Earth...Over the Wall, was it called? The power balance on Earth is directly linked to that of the inn town. If she is worshiped by a secret society that manipulates Earth from behind the scenes, then she can also control what is seen as right and wrong in the inn town. She laid the groundwork needed to control the majority.”

“???”

“...Still, that means she managed to get them to cooperate after they attacked you so much while you were defenseless. She gave an extra push to the ones she could trust after they were already shaken by what had happened. Almost like a psychological pincer attack. To the ones affected, it probably felt like a twinge of guilt. ...That toxic woman really is a Demon Lord to the core. A certain queen I know almost looks cute in comparison.”

“Squ-squeal... I’m not sure what you’re saying – cough – but you think Sutriona is cute?”

“Bfff!? Wh-wh-what would possess you to reach that conclusion!? Who would...who would ever like her!? Cough, cough!!”

The Vampire blushed bright red and shouted angrily, so Boo Boo ignored her and looked to the pile of Shining Weapons.

He had cleared the impossible task the Sage had left him with.

Now they could finally fix Beatrice’s Shining Weapon and get her back to Earth. Then Beatrice would not have to suffer any longer.

It was in sight.

It was coming down to the wire, but it was in sight.

“Now, a question concerning what comes next. Like I said, Tselika possesses great power on Earth by controlling a portion of Over the Wall. There was one thing she did not have the answer to when I contacted her, so I want your opinion too, Boo Boo. Given what I have heard, you were likely the last one to see her.”

“?”

“Where is the Sage?”

That symbol of death spoke clearly.

Boo Boo had finally started to see hope, but her words seemed to indicate a depthless darkness.

“Not even Tselika’s information network can find her. That may not be too surprising for the Sage, but where on Earth did she disappear to? And just to be sure, she will return before the time limit, won’t she?”

Part 16

The wooden wheels groaned as they rolled up the mountain.

Boo Boo pulled the cart full of Shining Weapons back to his house on the slope.

The Cave of Tears was also Tselika's treasure trove.

If that white Demon Lord did not know the answer, then the only other possibility was here.

But there was no sign of her.

There was no campfire lit and the tent-like leaf house was wrapped in silence.

"..."

It was hopeless now.

It had all crumbled around him.

...The Sage had left for Earth after suggesting they put Beatrice in cold sleep. She may have intended to ignore the time limit and take her time. If so, the misunderstanding was partially Boo Boo's fault. He had failed to change the Sage's mind or Beatrice's mind, so he had ended up just wandering around meaninglessly.

If he had shown more courage then, this crucial branch may have occurred sooner.

Struggling against the current of destruction was useless after it already had you in its grasp.

"Why...?"

He felt truly hopeless.

He could only sniffle and cry as he leaned on the handle used to pull the cart.

“...Why!!!???”

There was no invisible destiny. There was no cruel god. No matter how much he burned with regret and trembled, this was who he was. It had been the same with the attack on his village. It had all happened without his knowledge and it had been over by the time he noticed. The final decision had been made long, long before he realized what was happening. It was always like that. Was it simply his fate to have things taken from him and destroyed? It was his fault for not taking action to prevent it before it happened. He cursed how slow he was. He could not forgive his mind for never being able to keep up.

He could not come to a stop, but he had nowhere to go either.

He simply followed his homing instinct and trudged back to his tent-like home made from large leaves.

It remained the same.

Beatrice was sleeping in her underwear and a blanket as she waited for the time limit which was not provided as an obvious number.

There was no convenient change.

“What...is it, Boo Boo?”

“Beatrice...”

He had no idea what look he had on his face.

He simply clung to her and failed to hide the shaking of his voice.

“It’ll be okay.”

He said it.

He had no choice but to say it.

“Look, I spoke with everyone at the inn town and they all lent me the Shining Weapons that are more important than their lives. So everything will be okay. The Sage will take care of it now. There’s nothing to worry about. You’ll definitely get better now.”

That solution was no longer viable.

Due to a tiny misunderstanding, they had no idea where the Sage was.

Boo Boo was scared.

He was known as the Dragon Eater, but he was utterly terrified.

There's nothing I can do. I tried everything I could think of, but it wasn't enough.

His entire body was wrapped in the vague terror that speaking those words would make them true.

"Yes..."

Beatrice could not even sit up, but she smiled a bit while lying down.

"I'm really glad."

"...Beatrice."

"You've gained the courage to speak with other humans, haven't you? Look how beat up you are. It couldn't have been easy. But I'm really glad that you've made that kind of progress."

"Beatrice?"

"...This way you won't be lonely without me. Boo...Boo..."

She was smiling.

Her head wobbled a bit with that fleeting smile on her face.

And then her brief period of consciousness faded.

Almost like this was her natural state.

"...Of course I will be."

Finally.

Boo Boo bit his lip and spoke.

"Of course I will be."

Once he started, he could not stop.

Some kind of dam may have broken inside him.

"Of course I'll be lonely!! I don't want anyone else!! It has to be you, Beatrice! No one else can replace you!! I...I..."

There was no one to respond.

He had carved a symbol into 1000 trees, he had gathered all those people who were smarter than him, and he had convinced everyone from the inn town to leave their Shining Weapons with him.

And yet.

Cruel reality still insisted on taking everything from him.

He could only shout and yell.

He could only gather all his strength to lament how unfair it was.

"I like you best. It has to be you smiling there!!"

And.

Just then.

"...?"

He suddenly raised his head.

A faint light was flashing. It was inside the same leaf tent. And he was pretty sure it had not been there before. The red light was small, but it was unstable. It may have been a fire. Beatrice could not protect herself right now, so her life would be at risk if a lamp fell over and started a fire.

However, what he found was not at all what he had expected.

It was not a lamp full of oil.

The light came from Ultimate Weapon Abyss who had supposedly been deactivated next to Beatrice. A red triangular symbol was appearing and disappearing below her chest. It may have been some kind of warning. The lines on her black, skintight clothing also turned red.

"Abyss...?"

It happened as soon as he spoke her name.

He could not take his eyes off of the flashing red light. It had the same rhythm as the beating of his heart. No, the light may not have actually existed. A voice reached his brain while he stared at the red warning triangle that seemed

burned directly into the back of his mind.

Abyss// I must apologize. I had calculated this would happen from the beginning.

He could not fight it.

He could not move a single finger.

Boo Boo did not know that Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina had once used a virtual reality to experience the end of the world in advance, so he did not know that Abyss was capable of linking directly to living brains.

Abyss// I had hoped I was wrong, but it seems I expected too much from the world's kindness.

Abyss// This will be a difficult topic.

Abyss// Boo Boo, do you wish to save Beatrice?

"If there's a way..."

A straining sound came from all the muscles in his body.

He was still being controlled in some way, but the pig-faced giant still slowly but surely nodded his large head.

"...If there's a convenient way of doing that, then I'll do anything!"

Abyss// It is a horrible and very cruel thing.

Abyss// You will be unable to see the world after she has been saved.

Abyss// Knowing that, do you still wish to save her?

That went without saying.

The ultimate weapon took his silence for an answer and continued on.

Abyss// If you cannot fix Beatrice's Shining Weapon, you must provide her with a new one.

Abyss// You have always been able to do that.

Abyss// That weapon at your hip is a Shining Weapon.

Abyss// You will create a new settings profile for that free Shining Weapon

that no one is using.

Boo Boo did not understand the details of the technology, but he had a question. He was pretty sure the Sage had said that was not possible.

But there was no hesitation in Abyss's voice.

Abyss// The fact that you can hear me is proof that you are qualified.

"...Qualified?"

Abyss// Normally, contacting me requires a high-level data terminal such as a Shining Weapon.

Abyss// However, you are accessing me with nothing of the sort.

Abyss// How did you determine I was attempting to commit suicide in the Labyrinth's central shaft?

Abyss// How did you know the method of dueling Disaster who was created from dead flesh?

Abyss// How did you sense the sadness of the Underworld Lord who used artificial signals to control a vessel of flesh?

Abyss// No words were necessary.

Abyss// You possess the power to directly control faint electric currents.

Abyss// You are equipped with that function.

There was no way this explanation would feel real to him.

At any rate, Abyss was smarter than him and was giving him her guarantee.

That was all he understood.

Abyss// In the simulation, the other Iberian Orcs predicted a lightning strike.

Abyss// How did the souls in the Shining Weapon take control of your body?

Abyss// Did you sense an odd crackling feeling when the artificial atmospheric barrier was destroyed?

Abyss// Everything that happened was meaningful.

Boo Boo had no way of knowing, but the Red Iberian Orcs had attempted to

use their supercomputer-level brains to perform calculations equivalent to a Shining Weapon so they could hack the Gates and invade Earth. But simply performing the calculations in their head was not enough. If they could not exchange actual signals, they could not control the Gates.

Abyss// This was probably originally part of their role as a secret weapon against me.

Abyss// The Iberian Orcs absorbed the strong points of many lifeforms in order to battle me.

Abyss// I can only assume one of those lifeforms was some kind of electric fish that could produce electricity.

Abyss// Although I do not know if it was meant to understand the electricity that controls me or if it was meant to directly destroy me.

Even after being told this, Boo Boo did not suddenly know how to control it.

It was possible no one knew.

Iberian Orcs controlled each of their own powerful muscle fibers to avoid destroying themselves, but this may have been the greatest of secret techniques even for them.

Abyss// You only need to hold that free Shining Weapon and strongly will it to be.

Abyss// You need to register Beatrice as its owner.

Abyss// You can solve this by taking the image of Beatrice in your head and sending it into the Shining Weapon.

Abyss// After observing her from close by for so long, you should be able to do this.

But that could not be all it was.

Abyss had said at the beginning that he would be unable to see the world after Beatrice had been saved.

Abyss// The electric fish is just one possibility that was ultimately rejected and faded away.

Abyss// You only possess the degenerated bud and your body is not specialized for its use.

Abyss// If you forcibly use that power, your body will be exposed to the electric current you yourself create.

Abyss// The fate of a High Voltage Eel with no way of allowing its electricity to escape is clear as day.

Abyss// Thus, this is a double-edged sword.

Abyss// You will destroy your own body.

Abyss// That sacrifice is the only way to save Beatrice.

There was a way to save her.

If Boo Boo made that decision.

Knowing and not knowing were two very different things.

A drowning man would grasp at straws.

“...”

He thought about what this meant.

But Boo Boo softly smiled.

Abyss// I am sorry.

For some reason, she apologized.

And a moment later, he was freed from her bonds.

There was no more light coming from Ultimate Weapon Abyss. Not even Boo Boo himself knew whether she had really been glowing or if it had been an illusion only he could see.

Her voice no longer filled his head.

“It’s okay...”

This was all he said.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I am very grateful.”

He had no time.

Now was not the time to tremble and hesitate.

He had a way to save Beatrice.

He slowly breathed in and then drew the Shining Weapon which looked like a log or a steel beam.

“Boo...Boo...?”

He heard a voice.

He finally understood why Abyss had apologized. The girl’s consciousness had been rising and falling, and it had just risen once more. He did not know if Beatrice had heard the voice he had heard in his head, but Boo Boo’s words had been spoken aloud normally. That was only a fragment of the conversation, but she may have sensed something ominous about it.

“There’s nothing to worry about now.” He smiled. “This time I really will save you. So you don’t need to tremble in pain any longer...”

Beatrice slowly shook her head.

She may have gathered all of her remaining strength to tell him she did not want that.

He already knew that, but he did not listen.

He would remain true to himself to the end, just as she had. He would use his own strength to race to the finish line in order to protect something more important to him than his own life. He had made that decision.

Skull Wave had revealed that this feeling was love.

He started to say so, but he gulped and fell silent. It only mattered that he knew it. He had not embraced this feeling in order to indulge in something and worry over it. So he swallowed the words. He trampled and crushed the small feeling growing inside him and took the last step.

He would save her.

He would save the life of the person he cared for more than anyone else in the world.

Was this a small miracle?

Or was it an act of the devil?

With the giant Shining Weapon's grip in both hands, Boo Boo held it vertically, pressed his forehead against the striking portion, and shouted from the bottom of his gut.

Once he started, it did not take long.

It seemed to pour down. Something shot from the top of his head to the bottom of his butt. Several strange bluish-white flashes filled the leaf house and he sensed the unpleasant smell of his own flesh frying.

He had no way of checking on his own condition. His entire vision had whited out. Each of his organs wriggled on its own and moved so violently he thought he was being torn apart from skin to core.

He felt no pain.

His muscles would not stop convulsing. He could not even tell if he was breathing. His heart pounded irregularly and his mind seemed to be falling apart. When a piece fell away, he could not remember what it was no matter how hard he tried. No, he may not have been able to even try to remember. What was being destroyed: his muscle fibers, his ganglia, his skeleton, his organs, his heart, his life? He felt so horribly impatient, but he still focused his mind so very strongly on the image of that most important person. That became the only pillar of his world. He was already on the verge of forgetting his initial goal. Before he lost sight of everything, he had to fill the giant Shining Weapon with that girl's smile which remained in the core of his soul.

He heard some kind of phantom noise.

He felt a pressure like there was something on the other side of the raised Shining Weapon that resembled a log or steel beam. It was a quadrupedal beast, a giant scaly fish, and a monstrous bird that ruled the skies with its wings. It transformed again and again to show all the lifeforms the Iberian Orcs had incorporated into their genetic line and it spoke with a voiceless voice. The meaning of the words did not reach him, but the emotion contained within vividly pierced him.

Stop.

Turn back.

That may have been the thick pillar that supported his life. All lifeforms literally were forms of life. Life came first and foremost. He could not overcome the will to use his own power to keep living. Being the strongest may have made that pressure to live even stronger. The drive that had served him well during his previous battles was now working against him.

But. Even so.

He sensed some faint presences outside the tent-like leaf house. There were more than a thousand presences there. Boo Boo quickly realized those were the Shining Weapons the humans at the inn town had lent him. They had listened to his request and lent him that power so that Beatrice could live.

He was currently connected to the Shining Weapon that resembled a log or steel beam.

So why would he be unable to connect to the others?

“I won’t stop...”

He tore apart the idea of being strongest as an individual.

He was no longer alone and he could continue on with everyone’s help!

“I will protect her. That’s the path I chose! This...this decision is the strongest thing I can think of!!”

He would die. He knew that. But that was why he wished so hard to fill the Shining Weapon with the image, smile, and wonders of the person he cared for most. If he did that, he could leave something behind. Just like a flower scattering to drop its fruit.

He would not become nothing. He was not afraid.

He filled it in.

He filled in that blank space.

After seeing beyond the strongest that supported him, there was nothing left inside Boo Boo. His head wobbled and it would never rise back up. His powerful bones and muscles were no help at all with supporting his weight. As he

collapsed backwards, he could not even think of a reason why he needed to keep his balance.

His entire body had been fried.

It was over.

The shouting sounded different now. His throat had long since forgotten how to vibrate, so it probably now came from the girl lying on the floor. But he felt no fear. He did not understand why he was hearing that shrill cry.

If he collapsed, it would be over.

It would shatter the remaining shreds of his mind.

He knew that, but he did not fight it.

He no longer had the strength to fight it.

But.

However.

Just before he completely collapsed, he looked to the girl whose face was crumpled up like a bawling child and he smiled ever so slightly.

He could not remember why he was smiling.

But in the moment he truly vanished from the world, a string of sounds he did not understand spilled from his mouth: *It'll be okay now.*

Part 17

It was a small enough island for humans to walk the perimeter in three days.

With the scenic land and sea, it was a calm but never boring place.

A single form walked there.

That Holy Swordswoman had distinctive red and silver hair, red armor, and a white miniskirt. However, she did not wear her usual rapier at her hip.

Instead, she carried something on her back that was large enough to mistake for a log or steel beam.

The blunt weapon was clearly too large for her, but there was no pain on her face.

...She had wondered what the best place would be.

She had looked at a number of different spots, but there had always been only one real answer.

It was a small hill partway up a mountain.

He had always stood in that spot that overlooked the inn town the humans used as a base.

There was a quiet sound there.

The girl had stabbed the tip of a large shovel into the ground.

“Oh, Beatrice? Should you really be out and about so soon?”

That question came from White Witch Filinion, the girl’s friend.

The Holy Swordswoman did not remove the tip of the shovel from the ground as she dragged it along the hill.

“I wanted to come to Ground’s Nir and see how much I had recovered.”

“...Not that. Are you okay?”

The Fighter Priest held another shovel and she had a strange mixture of worry and exasperation in her voice.

The girl's movement nearly stopped, but in the end, the red-armored Holy Swordswoman drew the line to the very end.

"Of course I'm not okay."

She looked back at the lines she had drawn in the ground.

It was a large, large rectangle capable of containing a nearly-4m form.

"...But I have to do this. I have to look after him and see him off."

Once that was decided, the rest did not take long.

The sounds of digging continued for a while. Thanks to the Percentage-type Magic that took the form of the clothing they wore, they had the strength of construction equipment, so they quickly constructed a rectangle made of artificial straight lines not seen in nature.

"It doesn't just end with death..."

She seemed to reflect on each word individually.

No one knew what was in that girl's heart as she dug that large hole. Filinion and Armelina had stood by her side and fought back-to-back with her, but not even they could be certain.

At times, shaking your head and saying you did not know was the greatest form of compassion.

And Holy Swordswoman Beatrice said one last thing.

"Because Boo Boo told me to keep on living."

Epilogue: Welcome to a Blessed Time

That creature was small and round like a stuffed animal.

He swung his short arms and legs to walk through the forest. Normally, he may not have tried to go so far away from the village, but today was different. He had heard happy-sounding voices further out, so he had walked toward them.

When he finally saw who the voices belonged to, that gray pig-faced creature jumped.

(Squeal!? Humans!!)

Humans were scary. They would sometimes throw stones at him while he walked through the forest. Everyone at the village told him they did that because they were afraid of him, not because they hated him, but it was still not a good feeling.

He suddenly realized he was pretty deep inside the forest.

He wanted to run straight back the village, but if the humans followed him, he would be telling them where the village was. That would cause trouble for everyone else. But he was still scared. While running back and forth trying to figure out what to do, a loud sound rang out. His large head had run smack into a tree trunk.

He collapsed backwards.

The sudden shock initially just confused him, but then pain began spreading through him like normal.

“S-squeal...”

Finally, large tears welled up in his eyes.

He knew he should not cry, but he could not escape the urge.

And.

Just then, someone softly pressed a finger to that small round creature's forehead.

"It's okay."

He heard a gentle female voice.

"You have a small bump, but that's all. I'll get rid of the pain."

Strangely, the pain really did fade away.

But he found it much odder that this presumably human person did not throw stones at him as soon as she saw him.

He was not used to being treated kindly.

The stuffed animal blinked his eyes and the girl in red armor and a white miniskirt giggled.

"See, you're okay now. Boys shouldn't cry."

"Squeal..."

With a befuddled look, he swung his stubby arms and legs around and got up. He found the urge to cry had vanished. Being with this girl felt kind of nice. But that was why it scared him. What if her behavior changed and she suddenly attacked him? He might have to fight back against this kind-seeming person, and that would make him sad.

"You don't have to be so wary. I won't do anything to you."

"Really? You won't yell or hit me?"

"I swear I won't."

She did not seem to be lying.

So the small and round child gathered his resolve.

He decided to take just one step forward.

"Okay. Then I'll be your friend! I can be friends with you!!"

A change came over the red-armored and white-miniskirted girl's face when she heard that. It was strange how her eyes could look so sad even as she

smiled.

A voice called toward them from the distance.

It was the humans from before.

But unlike the round gray creature, the girl did not tense her body and she casually waved back at them.



“There really isn’t anything to worry about. That’s White Witch Filinon and that’s Fighter Priest Armelina. I’ll introduce you to a lot of other people too. Hee hee hee. I’ll show you that humans aren’t that bad.”

“Squeal? By the way, what’s your name???”

And.

The girl looked back toward him while carrying a giant Shining Weapon on her back. It resembled a log or a steel beam.

That girl with distinctive red and silver hair was definitely smiling as she answered.

“I’m Holy Swordswoman Beatrice. It’s a pleasure to meet you, boy.”

Today, those girls were on their way to Ground’s Nir’s Labyrinth like usual.

She stood in that foreign world with the life *he* had given her.

Afterword

If you bought one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought all six at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Boo Boo has reached its 6th volume too. The final obstacle has finally shown itself. The enemy this time was the Iberian Orcs. Their powerful bodies functioned as a great advantage for the protagonists since the very first volume, but now they are appearing en masse as enemies.

I tried to include all the settings, characters, and gadgets that had appeared before. I hope I made use of what I had built up.

What is strength?

With the title what it is, I made some twists to that concept and then approached the theme anew here. I tried to fill the manuscript with depictions of many different kinds of strength: in combat, as a person, in facing someone you love, and so on. Chapter 4 (which was not included in the table of contents) is the most striking example because I took a hard turn from the previous three chapters so I could present something that surpassed simple physical strength.

What did you think of Boo Boo's and Beatrice's choices?

Whether it is good or evil, I think the true strongest is something that does not allow external factors to determine its actions and that can turn white into black or black into white. If you look back at their actions with that in mind, you might see things from a different angle. We are talking about something that creates a happy ending on its own terms and forces things to be a happy ending no matter how much harm is done. If I have a chance to do a self-crossover, would he be rebuked or would he do the rebuking? I've made another character that would be fun to have in a clash between the different

protagonists.

For the entire Boo Boo series, I had decided to just do what I wanted without worrying about the power inflation.

What kind of drama could be found when a true strongest clashed with another one?

That is a part of the reason there were so many terms that point to a strongest being: the Level Cappers, the Break News, a Demon Lord, the Sage, the ultimate weapon, a Cold War hero, the Underworld Lord, the three royal families, and the Iberian Orcs. Instead of finding a new theme with each volume, I let the power inflation continue to rise with more types of strongest in each new volume. That sounds simple, but would be impossible with the normal battle story logic. And attempting something outside the norm is a lot of fun. Even with so many different strongests divided into their own categories, it isn't normal to not have a clear hierarchy where one of them stands at the absolute peak. Also, most of the main characters from Earth went by their handle names and did not have their real names revealed. I personally liked the odd gap of placing the Thousand Dragon and Sutriona in the same category of monster, but what was your favorite strongest? You can always have your story feature multiple heroines as something of a carpet bombing to ensure everyone will like one of them, but this was a test to include multiple strongests to see what kind of catharsis tugs at your heartstrings. I hope you found at least one strongest that was perfect for you.

There were so many strongests roaming that world, but I also wanted the setting itself to be relatively carefree. Of course, that was partially because I wanted that idyllic landscape to hide the secrets related to Abyss and Ground's Nir's name hidden at the bottom of the Labyrinth, but it had more to do with the strong impression of the characters themselves. From the beginning, I had the idea of the Break News that cause disasters and create battlefields wherever they go, so I thought of them as a part of the landscape. If you have a 1000m dragon flying around the sky and causing downpours, things will seem strange enough already.

Also, as the series went on, I secretly upgraded Boo Boo's cooking and I

intentionally worked the costumes into the plot starting with the second volume. Making those little themes for myself really sticks out to me. For Blood-Sign, I created an entire special language to create a difference between Earth and the other world, but I focused on a special ecosystem for this series. That said, the names were decided by the humans who visited that other world, so some things seem a bit mismatched. ...I think that's just how it is for adventurers who irresponsibly set foot in a foreign land, but what did all of you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, Kishigami-san, Mitera-san, and Yamamoto-san. I decided to try my hand at fantasy because I thought it would look exciting, but once I got started, I realized it had to be an incredible burden on the illustrator!! To be honest, my guess is there were a lot of characters and Shining Weapons that would have been difficult for the readers to picture without the illustrations. Thank you so very much for supporting the Boo Boo world which included just about everything: humans, nonhumans, and machines. I think the most incredible part was that piglet Boo Boo was actually cute. Even though he's a pig. Again, he's a pig, but the visual was cute enough that you could see why Beatrice fell for him. I can only say that I'm in awe.

And I give my thanks to the readers. This series was about the charm of the word "strongest", but I hope you all had a chance to rethink that topic. A strongest that has grown in only one direction is a somehow twisted thing. And even if that strongest covers every direction, having no weaknesses will also make you twisted. If you were immersed in that double-edged sword of strange charm and risk, then I could ask for nothing more.

And I will end this here.

Abyss died in her debut volume. She supposedly died...but she's done a hell of a lot since!!

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

Abyss// Have all of the questions truly been resolved?

Abyss// Did you think this was the best possible conclusion?